



Feminist contributions to understanding woman abuse: Myths, controversies, and realities

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ABSTRACT

Woman abuse in intimate heterosexual relationships takes different shapes and forms and is a worldwide public health problem. Many journalists, activists, and researchers, however, minimize the extent of woman abuse, sharply criticize feminist empirical, theoretical, and policy work on this issue, and disseminate myths about feminism. A key objective of this paper is to challenge these myths and respond to criticisms of feminist scholarship. Another goal is to show that some feminists use quantitative methods and that feminist techniques influence some types of conventional research, such as large-scale surveys conducted in Canada and the United States.

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1. Introduction

How and why violence is understood to occur underpins the directions taken by policy makers, service providers, and community activists to intervene and prevent male violence against women. Theories also play a critical role for suggesting new directions for research (Johnson & Dawson, 2011, p. 13).

Today, with so many television programs, newspaper articles, university courses, social scientific studies, and public awareness campaigns focusing on “intimate intrusions” (Stanko, 1985), it is hard to imagine that less than 40 years ago, male-to-female assaults behind closed doors were invisible and unacknowledged. Even family therapists, academics, and scholarly journals did not recognize gendered violence. Consider the highly respected and widely read

Journal of Marriage and Family. From its beginnings in 1939 through to 1969, this periodical contained no articles on wife abuse (O’Brien, 1971). In fact, a review of all editions of this journal published from 1939 to 1969, did not find a single article with the word “violence” in the title. The articles that did speak of relationships in which there was violence referred only to conflicts within marriage. The authors of these articles portrayed such “conflict” as normal and even healthy, and ignored the danger that could result from it. Interventions in these cases were aimed at the preservation of the family, never at protection or support for the woman who was abused. In sum, woman abuse was ignored or downplayed (DeKeseredy & MacLeod, 1997).

Now, there is plenty of quantitative evidence showing that woman abuse is a worldwide public health problem (Guggisberg, 2010; Shoener, 2008). For example, the World Health Organization conducted a multi-country study of the health effects of domestic violence. Over 24,000 women who resided in urban and rural parts of 10 countries were interviewed and the research team found that the percentage of women who were ever physically or sexually assaulted (or both) by an intimate partner ranged from 15 to 71%, with most research sites ranging between 29 and 62% (Garcia-Moreno, Jansen, Ellsberg, Heise, & Watts, 2005).

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Another major international study – the International Violence Against Women Survey (IVAWS) – interviewed 23,000 women in 11 countries. The percentage of women who revealed at least one incident of physical or sexual violence by any man since the age of 16 ranged from one-in-five in Hong Kong to between 50 and 60% in Australia, Costa Rica, the Czech Republic, Denmark, and Mozambique (Johnson, Ollus, & Nevala, 2008). Furthermore, in Australia, Canada, Israel, South Africa, and in the U.S., 40 to 70% of female homicide victims are murdered by their current or former partners (DeKeseredy, 2011a; Krug, Dahlberg, Mercy, et al., 2002). Another disturbing truth is that 14 girls and women are killed each day in Mexico (Mujica & Ayala, 2008). There are other types of woman abuse that do not receive much social scientific attention in North America, such as honor killings and dowry-related violence (Aronson Fontes & McCloskey, 2011). These, too, are not rare crimes. Note that annually, approximately 5,000 women and girls lose their lives to honor killings around the world (Proudfoot, 2009).

Following Mills (1959), numerous sociologists, especially those who are feminists, argue that there is something about broader structural and cultural forces, such as patriarchy, that allows for so very many women to be victimized. In North America, scores of researchers, practitioners, and activists agree that when we begin to look that the 11% or so of women in marital/cohabiting relationships who are physically abused each year by their male partners (DeKeseredy, 2011a), you begin to find, as Mills (1959) states, “an indication of a structural issue having to do with the institutions of marriage and the family and other institutions that bear upon them” (p. 9).

There are prominent politicians, journalists, activists, and researchers, however, who minimize the alarming extent of woman abuse and “launch scathing critiques” of feminist interpretations of the above data (Malley-Morrison, Hamel, & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2010, p. 4). For example, Dutton (2010) claims that only a “minority of men are violent either outside or within relationships. There is no norm for wife assault – this is a sociological fiction and contradicted by surveys (e.g., Simon et al., 2001)” (p. 8). Moreover, in Canada, and elsewhere, there is ample evidence of an ever changing and ongoing anti-feminist backlash (DeKeseredy & Dragiewicz, 2009), as well as other “patriarchal resistance strategies” that undermine women’s health, safety, and equality (Berns, 2001; Johnson & Dawson, 2011). One such episode occurred in Canada on October 3, 2006. Bev Oda, former federal Minister for the Status of Women Canada (SWC) announced that women’s organizations would no longer be eligible for funding for advocacy, government lobbying, or research projects. Moreover, SWC was required to delete the word *equality* from its list of goals (Carastathis, 2006). Many more examples could be provided here that challenge Dutton’s (2006) assertion that “women’s rights have finally been acknowledged after centuries of religion-based political oppression” (p. ix).

Large numbers of people, including members of conservative fathers’ rights groups, passionately disseminate myths about feminist empirical, theoretical, and policy work on woman abuse. A key objective of this paper, then, is to challenge these myths and respond to some widely cited criticisms of feminist scholarship. Still, the arguments presented in this article are not geared toward furthering an “us versus them” agenda. Rather, they are consistent with what several feminists define as a “rapprochement” between feminist and mainstream positivist research (Smith, 1994).¹ Thus, another goal of this paper is to show that some feminists use quantitative methods and that feminist research influences some types of conventional research, such as surveys conducted in Canada (e.g., DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 1998; Johnson, 1996). What Smith (1994) stated nearly 17 years ago still holds true today: “[T]he generally good quality of the data elicited demonstrates the value of adopting a feminist approach

to data gathering within a conventional survey research framework....” (p. 124).

2. What is feminism?

In the current political atmosphere characterized by a political counter-movement to degender the naming and framing of woman abuse (Bumiller, 2008; Johnson & Dawson, 2011), feminist inquiry is subject to countless vitriolic attacks, but most, if not all, who launch them have an inadequate understanding of feminism. For example, some religious groups, academics (e.g., Dutton, 2006), fathers’ rights associations, and right-wing politicians, equate feminism with hating men or view it as a movement aimed at helping women gain more power than men in political, economic, and social spheres (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 1996). Some feminists may fit into one or both of these categories; but, many men and women are feminists and they are united by a deep desire to produce scholarship that meets the highest disciplinary standards and to eliminate gender inequality, as well as homophobia, racism, and other means of oppression. As Renzetti (1993) points out, the goal of feminist scholars is “not to push men out so as to pull women in, but rather to gender the study” of violence against women and other social problems (p. 259).

Defining feminism is a difficult task. Yet, one thing leading experts in the field all agree with is that “feminism is not merely about adding women onto the agenda” (Currie & MacLean, 1993, p. 6). Feminism is referred to here as “a set of theories about women’s oppression and a set of strategies for change” (Daly & Chesney-Lind, 1988, p. 502). It is, though, erroneous to view feminism as a monolithic enterprise, which is frequently done in attacks on feminist research and theories. For example, Dutton (2010) incorrectly argues that:

The gender paradigm has, as its basis, a Marxist view of the sexes. MacKinnon (1989) began her book *Toward a Feminist Theory of State* with the claim that “sexuality is to feminism what work is to Marxism” (MacKinnon, 1989, p. 1). In short, all interactions between genders are reduced to power and control and are viewed from the perspective that male oppression of women is tantamount to the power of the bourgeoisie in suppressing the proletariat (p. 7).

There are Marxist feminists, but Catharine MacKinnon (cited above by Dutton) is definitely not one. She is a *radical feminist*. Radical feminists see male power and privilege as the “root cause” of all social relations, inequality, and violence against women. To radical feminists, the most important social relations in any society are based in patriarchy and all other relations, including social class, are secondary and derived from male–female relations (Beirne & Messerschmidt, 1995). On the other hand, heavily informed by the work of Karl Marx’s friend and colleague Friedrich Engels (1884), Marxist feminists contend that class and gender divisions of labor determine male and female positions in any society. Even so, the gender division of labor is viewed as the product of the class division of labor (Daly & Chesney-Lind, 1988; Messerschmidt, 1986). Since women are seen as being primarily dominated by capital and secondarily by men, the main strategy for change advocated by Marxist feminists is the transformation from a capitalist to a democratic society (Daly & Chesney-Lind, 1988; Messerschmidt, 1986).

Schwendinger and Schwendinger’s (1983) *Rape and Inequality*, which is rarely, if ever, discussed in conservative critiques of feminist scholarship, is a salient example of a Marxist feminist analysis of violence against women. The Schwendingers argue that rape is not common in all societies. Rather, based on their analyses of historical, cross-cultural, and anthropological data, they conclude that capitalist societies have the highest rape rates because they produce unequal gender relations that spawn increased violence. They also conclude

¹ Positivism assumes that human behavior is determined and can be measured (Curran & Renzetti, 2001).

that in noncapitalist societies, male–female relations are egalitarian, and thus rape is almost nonexistent.

There are at least 12 variants of feminist theory (Maidment, 2006), and except for Marxist feminism and socialist feminism, they do not have roots in the writings of Marx or Engels. Scholars familiar with the literature on the relationship between gender and violence are fully aware that there is more than one feminist perspective on woman abuse. Most of the theoretical developments on violence and gender postdate the early work cited by Dutton (2010) to support his claim (e.g., Dobash & Dobash, 1979). For example, there is a large body of feminist knowledge combining both macro- and micro-level variables, such as poverty, globalization, deindustrialization, intimate relationship status, familial and societal patriarchy, substance abuse, male peer support, and other factors (DeKeseredy & Dragiewicz, 2007). In sum, the assertion that feminism basically takes “a Marxist view of the sexes” is both wrong and a myth.

Not all feminists agree with each other. Although some feminist claims that patriarchy is the root source of women’s victimization, as noted above, the bulk of recent feminist literature on woman abuse does not view patriarchy as the only determinant. Actually, many feminists are among the most critical of single-factor explanations of female victimization, and some of the most important critiques of feminist work have come from debates among feminists (DeKeseredy, 2011b; Miller, 2003). Still, all feminists prioritize gender, which should not be confused with sex even though the terms are often incorrectly used interchangeably. Gender is the “sociocultural and psychological shaping, patterning, and evaluating of female and male behavior” (Schur, 1984, p. 10). Sex refers to the biologically based categories of “female” and “male,” which are stable across history and cultures (Dragiewicz, 2009). For example, violent crimes of all sorts are committed mainly by men (DeKeseredy, 2011b), but many societies have much lower rates of violence than those of the U.S., the Russian Federation, or Colombia (Currie, 2008; Krug et al., 2002). So, if “boys will be boys,” they “will be so differently” (Kimmel, 2000), depending on where they live, their peer groups, social class position, race/ethnicity, and a host of other factors (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2010; Messerschmidt, 1993). Additionally, woman abuse also varies across social class categories, intimate relationship status, etc. (Brownridge, 2009).

Most feminists also agree that the U.S., the United Kingdom, Canada, and many other countries are patriarchal societies (Ogle & Batton, 2009). There are conflicting definitions of patriarchy and it is a heavily contested concept (Hunnicut, 2009), but it is not uncommon to follow scholars such as Dobash and Dobash (1979) who assert that patriarchy consists of two key elements: a structure and an ideology. Structurally, patriarchy is a hierarchical organization in which males have more power and privilege than women. Certainly, North America is a continent characterized by gross gender inequity. For example, even today, laws in 30 U.S. states allow a man to receive conditional exemptions if he rapes his wife (Bergen, 2006; Caringella, 2009).²

The ideology of patriarchy provides a political and social rationale for itself. Both men and women come to believe that it is “natural” and “right” that women be in inferior positions. Men feel completely supported in excluding women and up to a point, women feel their exclusion is correct (DeKeseredy, 2011a). To someone (male or female) who believes completely in the ideology of patriarchy, the entire concept of equal rights or women’s liberation is a pretty difficult topic, sounding not only wrong, but unnatural (Schwartz & DeKeseredy, 1997).

As is typically ignored in mainstream critiques of feminist perspectives on woman abuse (e.g., Dutton, 2006, 2010), there are varieties of patriarchy (Hunnicut, 2009). For example, many feminist

scholars focus on *social patriarchy*, which refers to male domination at the societal level, as discussed previously. A subsystem of social patriarchy, often called *familial patriarchy*, refers to male control in domestic or intimate settings (Barrett, 1985; Eisenstein, 1980; Ursel, 1986). These two components cannot be pulled too far apart and one variant cannot be fully understood without reference to the other (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2009; Smith, 1990).

It is well beyond the scope of this article to examine the many different feminist perspectives on woman abuse. In fact, there are entire books on feminist approaches to understanding this issue (e.g., DeKeseredy, 2011a; Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Katz, 2006; Yllo & Bograd, 1988). Nevertheless, as Stanko (2006) observes, it cannot be emphasized enough that “what is often missing from a general understanding of violence is asking what can be learned from the struggles feminists have waged for decades now against sexual and physical assault” (p. 554). To be sure, people seeking to gain a sophisticated understanding of current feminist contributions will learn little from reading the inaugural issue of the journal *Partner Abuse* (Volume 1, Number 1, 2010). As stated in the Guidelines for Authors, “A basic premise of the journal is that partner abuse is a human problem, and that the particular role of gender in the etiology, perpetration and consequences of emotional and physical partner abuse cannot be assumed....” Gender, however, “matters” and cannot be dismissed or trivialized. It is, again, not the same thing as sex and the distinction is essential to understanding woman abuse for reasons repeatedly stated by a vibrant international cadre of scholars, practitioners, and activists (Dragiewicz, 2009).

3. Myths and realities about feminism

There are many myths about feminist perspectives on woman abuse, including a few described in the previous section. There are others repeatedly stated, such as feminism “is founded on a political view – a Marxist view – it has literally nowhere to advance scientifically” (Dutton, 2010, p. 18). There are three major problems with this claim, one that was addressed earlier (e.g., feminism is based on Marxism). The other two are as follows. First, as is often said, “all writing is political” (Sartre, 1964, p. 29) and there is no such thing as truly value free research or theorizing, a point made years ago by pioneering sociologist Max Weber (1964), among others. Academic critics of feminism, like all scholars, “do not see the world ‘as is,’ but they learn to see it” (Cao, 2004, p. 16). Hence, no one has a monopoly on the truth and there are different ways of knowing, which is at the core of all social scientific work.

Related to this point is that those who refer to feminists as “ideologues” and who portray themselves as “objective scientists” are actually advancing their own political agendas, such as reasserting patriarchy (Dragiewicz, 2008). Feminist scholars, though, put their politics in the lime light for all to view and are indeed committed to eliminating structured social inequality and its highly injurious symptoms, such as woman abuse (DeKeseredy & Dragiewicz, 2007). If feminists, then, are what many conservatives label as members of a “special interest group” (Johnson & Dawson, 2011), the same can be said about those who denounce feminist work and advance a degendered understanding of rape, femicide,³ and so on.

Why critics such as Dutton (2010) would claim that feminism is, for the most part, rooted in Marxism is an empirical question that can only be answered empirically. Even so, it is worth briefly discussing several reasons for making this statement. Perhaps those hostile to feminism are not familiar with the extant literature (DeKeseredy & Dragiewicz, 2007). Or, especially in a post 9/11 political economic climate typified by much fear and xenophobia, Marxian thought is reviled by mainstream North American society and therefore it is

² A husband is exempt in these states if his wife is mentally ill or physically impaired, unconscious, asleep, or unable to consent (Bergen, 2006).

³ Femicide is the murder of women by their current or former male partners (DeKeseredy, Ellis, & Alvi, 2005).

easier to generate much populist disdain for feminist contributions. Thus, equating Marxism with all types of feminism may be an intentional political act rather than a critique based on science.

The second problem with the myth of Marxism and feminism not being scientific is that they are no more or less scientific than other perspectives. For example, there is ample evidence of both Marxists and feminists gathering and analyzing rich quantitative and qualitative data (DeKeseredy, 2011b). Often, too, feminists conduct representative sample surveys of woman abuse and test hypotheses derived from their own theoretical work (e.g., DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 1998; Johnson, 1996; Smith, 1990), as well as from mainstream perspectives such as routine activities theory and collective efficacy theory (DeKeseredy, Alvi, Schwartz, & Tomaszewski, 2003; Schwartz, DeKeseredy, Tait, & Alvi, 2001). Undoubtedly, there is much empirical diversity found in the feminist literature on woman abuse, which reflects the view that research methods are tools that can be used in a variety of ways to achieve a variety of goals. Think of something as a simple as a shovel. It can be used to build a rape crisis center or a private prison that punishes economically excluded victims of the U.S. government's "war on drugs." Obviously, feminists prefer using a shovel to build a rape crisis center and use research methods to reveal how broader social forces combined with micro-level factors contribute to woman abuse. Researchers take different approaches to understanding a single topic and promoting paradigm hostility does little, if anything, to advance a social scientific understanding of behaviors, attitudes, beliefs, social groups, and social systems that cause much pain and suffering.

There are other widely disseminated myths about feminism, such as the notion that feminists strongly support mandatory arrest and prosecution policies and they ignore women's use of violence (Dutton, 2006, 2010). Since detailed responses to these myths are published elsewhere (see DeKeseredy & Dragiewicz, 2007), they are only briefly addressed here. Again, feminism is not monolithic and there are at least 12 feminisms. Hence, it is not surprising that some feminists call for "tough, law and order" responses to wife beating, sexual assault, and the like. Still, today, scores of feminists are very critical of punitive strategies and the professionalization of antiviolence work because these approaches individualize the problem of woman abuse and disconnect it from gender inequality (Bumiller, 2008; Johnson & Dawson, 2011). At the same time, many feminists struggle to extend the equal protection of the law to women (e.g., working to overturn marital rape exemptions).

People tend to locate the solution in the same place where they locate the problem. Thus, if the problem of male-to-female violence is one of the mental health of men or lack of respect for the law, then the broader social system presumably does not have a problem. The solution, then, is to treat, "fix," or punish the men so that they will work within the dominant social order (Bumiller, 2008). Conversely, given the high rates of woman abuse across the world, most feminists assert that policies that attack only the individual are ineffective. For them, dealing one man at a time, whether in a clinical setting or in the criminal justice system, will never solve this society wide problem (DeKeseredy, 2011b). Similarly, curing alcohol problems will not cure violence because most abusive men continue to physically, sexually, and psychologically harm female intimates after they have reached sobriety. As Gelles and Cavanaugh (2005) remind us, contrary to popular belief, "There is no conclusive empirical evidence to support a causal relationship between abuse and alcohol or other drug use or abuse" (p. 188).

The claim that feminists ignore female violence is a "factoid." In other words, it is "an invented fact believed to be true because of its appearance in print" (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, 2005, p. 1). In reality, there is a rapidly growing body of feminist research on female-to-male and female-to-female violence. For example, the journal *Violence Against Women* published a three-part special issue titled "Women's Use of Violence in Intimate Relationships" in 2002

and 2003 (Volume 8, Numbers 11 and 12; Volume 9, Number 1). Further, for decades, feminist scholars such as Meda Chesney-Lind and others have devoted much time and effort to examining the contexts, meanings, and motives of girls' use of violence in a variety of social settings. As is the case in private areas, girls and women are not becoming more violent and dangerous in public places and the widely held notion that this is the case is fueled by anti-feminists and "condemnatory media images" of females, such as those involving relational aggression in Hollywood movies like *Mean Girls* (Chesney-Lind & Irwin, 2008; Chesney-Lind & Jones, 2010; Schissel, 1997).

Myths about feminism are part and parcel of everyday life, and they will never disappear. And, there will always be researchers, activists, and practitioners who reject the contributions of people who approach topics or social problems in ways distinct from them (DeKeseredy & Dragiewicz, 2007). Nevertheless, there is less paradigm hostility than that described by Dutton (2006, 2010), Felson (2010), and others. As a matter of fact, a growing number of feminist and mainstream or nonfeminist scholars are joining forces to develop "creative solutions" to address some major research "challenges for the violence against women field" (Campbell, 2000). It is to some of these solutions that I turn to next.

4. Studying woman abuse: academic apartheid⁴ or the genuine sharing of knowledge

Studying woman abuse brings many people from different disciplines together. It also produced bitter divisions among social scientists and there are frequent vitriolic attacks on feminist scholarship, some of which include assaults on researchers' professionalism and integrity. For instance, Dutton (2006) asserts that some of my work with Martin D. Schwartz is an example of the "woozle effect,"⁵ or a "flagrant error in citing a research finding" (p. 28). Another example is Felson's (2010) claim that feminists use "bumper sticker terminology" that lacks credibility. To be sure, readers unfamiliar with theoretical and empirical work on woman abuse are likely to get the impression that all feminists and those informed by other schools of thought (e.g., positivism) categorically reject other points of view (Gondolf, 2007). This, too, is a myth.

Over the past 30 years we have witnessed great advances in victimization survey research, due in large part to the efforts of feminist scholars. Further, many feminists today recognize that their empirical concerns can be effectively addressed by adhering to the "cannons of established social science" (Smith, 1994, p. 123). For example, feminists DeKeseredy and Schwartz (1998) conducted a national survey of male and female Canadian college/university students and analyzed their data using sophisticated statistical techniques. They also employed several feminist approaches based on the success of Smith's (1987, 1994) Toronto woman abuse survey, such as broad definitions of woman abuse, multiple measures, multidimensional measures, and supplementary open- and closed-ended questions. Moreover, hypotheses derived from several theories were empirically tested. It is, above all, significant to note that what Smith (1994) refers to as the "women-centered approach" used in studies conducted by him, DeKeseredy and Schwartz (1998), Johnson (1996), and Tjaden and Thoennes (2000) generated much higher rates of victimization than do most conventional surveys (DeKeseredy, 2009). For sure, as many highly experienced methodologists would quickly point out (e.g., Bohrnstedt, 1983), the above research strategies are not associated exclusively with a feminist approach to woman abuse survey research (Smith, 1994).

A few well-known government agencies also recognize the merits of feminist approaches. For example, in the U.S., the Centers for Disease Control, the Department of Justice, and the Department of

⁴ This is the main title of Felson's (2010) critique of feminist inquiry.

⁵ See DeKeseredy and Schwartz (1998).

Defense developed the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Surveillance System (NISVSS), which will be the next U.S. National Violence Against Women Survey (Lynberg Black, 2008).⁶ The NISVSS employs a broad definition of violence and will measure physical assaults, psychological aggression, coercive control and entrapment, sexual violence, stalking, and harassment. The results of this study are likely to enhance our understanding of violence against women and, hopefully, help reduce much pain and suffering. Furthermore, those involved in developing and administering the NISVSS consulted with a diverse range of scholars, some of whom identify themselves as feminist and some who do not. The key point to consider here, though, is that great care was taken to implement a feminist approach and address one of the primary objectives of mainstream survey research: eliciting valid and reliable data from a representative sample (Smith, 1994).

Many more examples of productive collaborative efforts could easily be documented, such as feminist and nonfeminist scholars teaming up to advocate for improved services for battered women and rape survivors. Indeed, feminism is, today, less “celebratory,” much more “self-critical,” and more open to using traditional scientific approaches than in its earliest days (DeKeseredy, 2011b; McCormack, 1990; Smith, 1994). However, a critical question remains. How do we move woman abuse research and prevention further ahead? Undoubtedly, meaningful partnerships and sincere dialog are superior to angry critiques designed to “win a point” in the “name of science” (Renzetti, 1997, p. vi). Nevertheless, in this era characterized by “Tea Party” politics,⁷ a rabid anti-feminist backlash, and other conservative efforts to reassert class, gender, and ethnic inequality, many who oppose feminism and who perpetuate myths about this school of thought are heavily involved in a process of demonstrating that they are more authoritative (Dragiewicz, 2008; Gondolf, 2007). And, it is their voice – not those of feminists or abused women – that is the loudest. Ironically, this situation has a positive consequence for the social scientific community since feminists’ studies are generally very rigorous because they know that they will be subject to heightened scrutiny and criticism for being “political” rather than scientific (Romito, 2008). As Stanko (1997) puts it, “Those who make such accusations have not been reading the research carefully... or not reading the research at all” (p. 79).

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⁶ The first National Violence Against Women Survey was conducted by Tjaden and Thoennes (2000).

⁷ Born in the U.S. in 2009, the Tea Party is a conservative socio-political movement.

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