



# Women, Men and Domestic Violence



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## INTRODUCTION

<sup>1</sup> For example, from reported crime statistics, men in Australia commit about 91% of homicides, 90% of assaults, nearly all sexual assaults and nearly all armed and violent robberies.

<sup>2</sup> Heady, B, Scott, D, & de Vaus, D, *Domestic Violence in Australia: Are Women and Men Equally Violent?*, Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research, Melbourne, 1999.

Domestic violence was made a public issue by the second wave of the women's movement as 'violence against women' and now has a long political history. Research over the past two decades in Australia has shown that violence generally, and particularly domestic violence, is mainly carried out by men.<sup>1</sup> Recently, though, some people have been concerned that domestic violence carried out by females towards their male partners is being underreported, ignored or covered up.<sup>2</sup>

While there is evidence that both men and women are abusive in domestic relationships, most data show that men are more likely than women to be violent towards their partners. The findings of research differ greatly according to the way the research is done, but they clearly show that the nature and results of men's violence are different to that of women's violence in a number of significant ways. In particular:

- men's violence is more severe, and more likely to inflict severe injury;
- women are more likely to be killed by current or former male partners than by anyone else; and
- less than 10% of Australian male homicides are carried out by an intimate partner. When women do kill their male partners, there is a history of domestic violence in more than 70% of cases.

## STUDIES OF THE RATES OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN AUSTRALIA

We will never really know how much domestic violence exists in the community. This is because social sanctions prevent open discussion of the issue, and because the problem shows itself in various ways.

Researchers have used a variety of approaches to explore the extent of domestic violence in the community. These include:

- identifying the victims of crime;
- doing large-scale population surveys that include questions about interpersonal violence;
- doing specific surveys of domestic violence or violence against women; and
- examining police and hospital data.

Each of these approaches has its strengths and weaknesses.

National and international estimates of the incidence of domestic violence vary from study to study for the following reasons:

- variations in definitions of interpersonal violence, resulting in differences in what is asked about and what is left out;
- differences in sample sizes, response rates and whether high risk groups are included or not;
- differences in what and how those surveyed remember events, including variations in the time frame used; and
- variations, from agency to agency, in the recording of the incidents that are called domestic violence.

In 1996, a study of the rate of domestic violence in Western Australia drew from a number of sources: police data, a victims of crime survey, and community services and hospital data.<sup>3</sup> The Western Australian police records showed that 91.4% of victims were women, and 8.6% were men, indicating that women were ten times more likely to be victims of domestic violence than men. In the same study, a survey of 3061 people (1511 males and 1550 females) identified only three male victims. Across the range of sources used in this research, women made up between 88 and 92% of all domestic violence victims.

<sup>3</sup> Ferrante, A, Morgan, F, Indermaur, D, & Harding, R, *Measuring the Extent of Domestic Violence*, Hawkins Press, Annandale, 1996.

A national survey conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in 1996 collected information on the nature and extent of violence against women in Australia. The results, published in *Women's Safety Australia*, provided national benchmark data in this area.<sup>4</sup> The study indicated that, of 6300 women interviewed, 7.1% had experienced physical and/or sexual violence in the past 12 months, most frequently in the home. The report found that 23% of women who have ever been married or in a de facto relationship had experienced physical violence from a male partner.

<sup>4</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Women's Safety Australia*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 1996. As the focus was on violence against women, men were not included in this survey.

A 1998 South Australian study of the occurrence of domestic violence reported the results of a random telephone survey that included physical and emotional abuse in its measurement of domestic violence.<sup>5</sup> The survey interviewed 3001 people (52.1% women and 48.8% men). Eighteen per cent of those interviewed reported that they had experienced forms of domestic violence. Of this 18% (540 people), 66% were women and 34% men. This self-report survey indicated higher levels of female-to-male violence than police and other data suggest. However, an important difference in the data was that, when victims of physical domestic violence were asked about its effects, 16.5% of men reported being physically hurt compared to 50.5% of women.

<sup>5</sup> *South Australian Health Goals and Targets: Violence and Abuse Priority Areas*, South Australian Department of Human Services, Adelaide, 1998.

In 1999, *Femicide: An Overview of Major Findings* provided an overview of a larger study of the intentional killing of women in Australia aged 15 years and over.<sup>6</sup> The study analysed 2821 homicide incidents that occurred between 1 July 1989 and 30 June 1998. Of the 3045 homicide victims, about one-third were female and two-thirds were male.

<sup>6</sup> Mouzos, J, *Femicide: An Overview of Major Findings*, Australian Institute of Criminology, Canberra, 1999.

Men committed 88.6% of the homicides and women 11.4%. Over half of the homicides involved the killing of men by other men. Male offenders were responsible for killing approximately 94% of adult female victims. The vast majority of these killings occurred within an intimate relationship. Almost 60% of women were killed by an intimate male partner, but only 11% of men were killed by intimate partners, 84% of whom were female.

In intimate relationships, approximately 90% of women were killed as a result of 'altercations of a domestic nature' and 40% of these were associated with desertion, the ending of a relationship or jealousy.

Some studies of dating violence have shown that females tend to engage more in lower level forms of violence and males in more severe forms of violence.<sup>7</sup> For example, one study found that, while the overall number of males who had carried out violence was lower than for females, the violent males had been so on more occasions and in more relationships than the females had.

<sup>7</sup> Roscoe, B, & Callahan, J, 'Adolescents' self report of violence in families and dating relations', *Adolescence* 20 (79), 1985, 545-53.

If we look at the approaches used by various researchers, it may help to explain why estimates of the rates and prevalence of domestic violence differ from study to study.

## TYPES OF RESEARCH

<sup>8</sup> Straus, MA, 'Measuring intra family conflict and violence: the conflict tactics scale', *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 41, 1979, 75–88; Straus, MA, & Gelles, RJ, 'Societal change and change in family violence from 1975–1985 as revealed by two national surveys', *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 48, 1986, 465–79.

Studies conducted in North America and recently in Australia have been used to support claims that men and women are equally violent. The majority of these studies measure the extent of violence to obtain their findings. The most commonly used method is the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS), which has been used by many North American researchers, including in the often-cited Behind Closed Doors telephone survey.<sup>8</sup>

### *The Conflict Tactics Scale—measuring the extent of violence*

The CTS is a tool for recording how much violence occurs. One partner (not both) is telephoned and asked about his or her experience of violence in the relationship. Acts of violence are recorded according to a violence incidence scale, ranging from minor violence (including 'crying' and 'shouting') to severe violence (including 'threw something at him/her' and 'beat him/her up'). In 1986, one study found rates of domestic violence to be 122:1000 for male-to-female violence and 124:1000 for female-to-male violence—slightly higher than male-to-female.

Many researchers have seriously questioned the extent to which these figures reflect the nature of domestic violence. Moreover, the researchers themselves later pointed out that two important factors should not be overlooked:

- in the same category of violence, men can often inflict more damage than women because of their greater size and strength; and
- nearly three-quarters of women's violence is self-defence.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Straus, M, & Gelles, R, *Physical Violence in American Families: Risk Factors and Adaptations to Violence in 8145 Families*, Transaction Press, New Brunswick, USA, 1990.

Additional information suggests that men are more likely to engage in more severe forms of physical violence and over longer periods, and that the effects are more severe on the female victim.

<sup>10</sup> For extensive critiques of this scale see DeKeseredy, W, & Schwartz, M, *Measuring the Extent of Woman Abuse in Intimate Heterosexual Relationships: A Critique of the Conflict Tactics Scales*, US Department of Justice, Violence Against Women Online Resources, <http://www.vaw.umn.edu/research.asp>, 1998; Dobash, RE, Dobash, RP, Daly, M, & Wilson, M, 'The myth of sexual symmetry in marital violence', *Social Problems* 39 (1), 1992, 71–91; Straton, JC, 'The myth of the battered husband syndrome', *Masculinities: Interdisciplinary Studies on Gender* 2 (4), 1994, 79–83.

Many researchers have highlighted a range of problems with the use of such numbers-based surveys alone to measure the incidence or prevalence of domestic violence.<sup>10</sup> For example, the limitations with versions of the CTS are:

- the complex nature of the experience of domestic violence is reduced to single measurable acts;
- no distinction is made between attack and defence;
- results that only include measurements tell us nothing about the situation in which the violence occurs;



- they give no consideration to the meaning or intent of the acts;
- they do not discriminate between the intent and the effect of violent acts;
- they assume, incorrectly, that partners are equal in negotiations;
- the types of violence are ranked and poorly differentiated (for example, ‘having kicked, bit, hit or tried to hit with an object’; ‘beat up’ or ‘choked’; or ‘threatened with a knife’ or ‘fired a gun’ are all inappropriately grouped as ‘severe violence’);
- they do not include many violent acts, such as burning, suffocating, squeezing, spanking, scratching, sexual assault and many forms of psychological, social and economic abuse;
- violence is only counted over a one-year period and therefore the history of the violence in the relationship is not considered (for example, a single slap can be equivalent to many years of abuse); and
- violence is only seen as the result of differences or conflicts, and these surveys do not take into account attempts by one partner to control the other for no identifiable reason.

#### *Recent similar Australian research*

Many people have expressed concern about the reported findings of the International Social Science Survey Australia’s (IsssA) 1996–1997 Family Interaction module, which included questions about domestic violence in order to determine how often it occurred.<sup>11</sup> As with the North American research using the Conflict Tactics Scale, women and men in this study reported approximately equal rates of being assaulted by their partner for the three types of assault asked about.

<sup>11</sup> Heady, B, Scott, D, & de Vaus, D, *Domestic Violence in Australia: Are Women and Men Equally Violent?*, Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research, Melbourne, 1999.

The IsssA survey asked only one of each couple whether they or their partner had:

- slapped, shaken or scratched the other;
- hit the other with the fist or with something held in the hand;  
or
- thrown or kicked the other.

The survey did not refer to a wide range of physically violent acts (including smashing objects, torturing pets and sexual violence), or to the various forms of psychological, emotional, social and economic abuse that are commonly used against victims during domestic violence.

<sup>12</sup> Jouriles, EN, & O'Leary, KD, 'Interspousal reliability of marital violence', *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 53, 1985, 419–21; Szinovacz, ME, 'Using couple data as a methodological tool: the case of marital violence', *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 45, 1983, 633–44.

<sup>13</sup> Edleson, J, & Brygger, M, 'Gender differences in reporting of battering incidences', *Family Relations* 35, 1986, 377–82; Currie, DH, 'Violent men or violent women? Whose definition counts?', in *Issues in Intimate Violence* (ed RK Berge), SAGE Publications, Thousand Oaks, USA, 1998, 97–111.

Most of the criticisms of the Conflict Tactics Scale can also be applied to the IsssA survey, including that it does not discriminate between intent and effect, and does not record the history of violence or the situation in which the violent behaviour took place. The IsssA researchers also interviewed only one partner and relied on self-reporting of violence. Other studies that have independently interviewed both partners have found that their accounts of violence did not match.<sup>12</sup> A number of studies have also suggested that men who are violent in intimate relationships typically underreport their violence by as much as 50%.<sup>13</sup> These studies suggest that CTS surveys do not accurately record the facts of violence in the community.

The IsssA survey asked about 'threats' and 'feelings of intimidation', and the responses to these questions give a clue as to how the experiences of men and women differ. While similar percentages of men and women revealed that their partner had threatened to 'slap, hit or attack', significantly more women (7.6%) than men (4.0%) said they felt 'frightened and intimidated'. The researchers also noted other significant information that may influence the findings, namely that 'some victims of domestic violence are in refuges and so not available in surveys', and 'perpetrators and victims of severe violence may also be less willing to admit what is going on than are people in milder situations'.

The IsssA survey also found that men are as likely as women to be victims of domestic assaults that lead to injury and pain. This evidence is contrary to the findings of other studies, such as the South Australian Health Goals and Targets Survey, where a much greater rate of women than men reported being injured. The IsssA researchers, however, did warn that their evidence should be treated with caution because it ran counter, not just to conventional belief, but also to medical and police records, and that these issues needed further research.

#### *More broadly based studies*

A recent study that used *both* the CTS-style research *and* assessments of the *nature* of domestic violence, found that women and men had different definitions of violent behaviour.<sup>14</sup> Men tended to exaggerate women's behaviour when telling about incidents of physical abuse. Men found women's violent behaviour 'notable' or 'remarkable', but not seriously threatening. On the other hand, women 'discounted', 'underestimated', 'downplayed' or 'normalised' the violent

<sup>14</sup> Currie, DH, 'Violent men or violent women? Whose definition counts?', in *Issues in Intimate Violence* (ed RK Berge), SAGE Publications, Thousand Oaks, USA, 1998, 97–111.

behaviour of their male partners by describing it as ‘excusable’ or ‘understandable’. Women with violent partners also often assumed responsibility for a violent incident, blamed themselves for causing it, and worried that their partner’s reaction to the incident could contribute to further violence.

Other studies have also identified ways in which battered women justified their continued involvement with a violent spouse.<sup>15</sup> These included denying the assaulter’s responsibility; denying the extent of their own injuries; taking the blame for the situation; denying the possibility of leaving, because of economic dependency; and having a sense of moral commitment towards the partner and their children.

<sup>15</sup> In Eisikovits, Z., & Peled, E, ‘Qualitative research on spouse abuse’, in *Family Violence: Research and Public Policy Issues* (ed DJ Besharov), The AEI Press, Washington DC, USA, 1990, 1–12.

In summary, the many studies of domestic violence report varying rates of female and male victims in domestic violence. It is apparent that different research approaches and definitions of domestic violence can affect the research results. Given that studies which look at only the *extent* of domestic violence can show little of its complex nature, it is useful to compare them with a 1998 South Australian study that looked at the *experiences* of victims.

## COMPARING THE EXPERIENCES OF MALE AND FEMALE VICTIMS

### *Women as victims*

The data gathered from female victims in the 1998 South Australian study, through a phone-in and focus groups, provide further evidence that surveys to measure the extent of domestic violence do not and cannot accurately describe the full experience of the victim of domestic violence.<sup>16</sup> In particular, abuse of power, which gives rise to fear and intimidation, is something that these tools cannot measure.

<sup>16</sup> Bagshaw, D, Chung, D, Couch, M, Lilburn, S, & Wadham, B, *Reshaping Responses to Domestic Violence*, Office for the Status of Women, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, Canberra, 1999.

Violence is hard to measure. For example, when female domestic violence victims in this South Australian study were asked how often the violence and abuse happened, they often reported that ‘he only hit me once or twice in a month, but I lived in the fear he would hit me every day’. The phone-in respondents were asked to consider the full range of abusive behaviours. When asked how frequently abuse happened, 84% responded that they experienced abuse at least once or twice a week, or more often. Forty-nine per cent reported abuse as a daily experience. Many reported that multiple forms of abuse occurred simultaneously.

The South Australian study (and most other research) challenges the general view that domestic violence is mainly physical: hitting, slapping, pushing and so on. ‘Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me’ did not hold true for those interviewed in this study. The vast majority reported that verbal, psychological and emotional abuse occurred daily, and was far more devastating and long lasting in its effect. Many thought that the unpredictable nature of the abusive outbursts was particularly distressing, a fact that can be seen clearly in other studies.

Victims reported that psychological and emotional abuses were built into their relationships, and occurred around the ‘little things’ of daily life. Most victims reported that threats of physical violence were as powerful in controlling them as the actual incidents of violence. This was because the perpetrators had shown that they were capable of carrying out the threats.

There is a strong case for all forms of domestic violence to be regarded as serious and unacceptable controlling behaviour, not just those acts involving physical assaults and injuries.

Female victims of domestic violence in the South Australian study confirmed the prevalence of physical, psychological, emotional, social and financial abuse (often in combination), as well as other intimidating or controlling forms of abuse, such as stalking, sleep deprivation or driving a car too fast.<sup>17</sup> They also described patterns of extreme cruelty that often developed in long-term, violent relationships, with ‘strategies’ of abuse becoming more diverse over time.

Ninety-five per cent of those interviewed reported that they had experienced abuse over a period of years. In many relationships, acts of cruelty were carried out on the women, the children in the family (as primary and secondary victims) and on family pets. Humiliation, cruelty, jealousy, isolation from friends and family and the infliction of emotional, sexual or physical pain were common experiences. Victims frequently spoke of the abusers’ need to control all aspects of their life, both in and away from the house.

The link between length of relationship and the experience of cruelty was particularly notable, especially as the common theme in the women’s accounts was their daily experience of living in fear. The findings indicated that the vast majority of female victims were frightened of their partner, compared to none of the male victims.

### *Men as victims*

In the 1998 South Australian study, nine (7.5%) of the 120 people who called the phone-in were male victims of domestic violence in heterosexual relationships. (This was a self-identifying phone-in and did not survey the *rates* of domestic violence in the population.) The majority of the nine male victims indicated that they had difficulty in expressing their experience. They reported experiencing a wide range of violent behaviours from their female partners, including physical, verbal, emotional, social and financial abuse.<sup>18</sup>

In addition to these nine men, there were some male callers who initially identified themselves as victims, but then went on to describe being *perpetrators* of domestic violence. These men were not victims of violence at the hands of their female partners. Rather, the men argued that once their female partners had reported their violent behaviour to law enforcement authorities or other services, they were ‘victimised’ by the service providers, who were more inclined to listen to their partners’ side of the story. These men were not included in the descriptions of male victims of domestic violence, as they had not experienced violence or abuse from their female partners.

<sup>17</sup> The South Australian phone-in interviewed 120 callers (most of whom were female victims of violence). The female respondents reported all forms of abuse and often the various forms of abuse overlapped in one abusive event. The following summarises their responses.

- *Physical abuse*

Of all women callers, 86% reported physical abuse, including direct assaults on the body resulting in severe injuries and requiring significant medical intervention. Weapons were used in a number of cases and in others there was the threat that weapons could be used. However, physical abuse included a wide range of intimidating behaviours other than hitting such as: driving dangerously in the car, smoking in the house when the woman has a serious respiratory condition, the destruction of property, abuse of pets in front of family members, physical assault of the children, locking the victim out of the house on cold nights without any clothing, and sleep deprivation.

- *Sexual abuse*

The experience of sexual abuse was reported by 50% of the callers. Sexual abuse ranged from sexual pressure and coercion, comments about women’s unattractiveness, forcing women to take part in various degrading and pornographic sexual acts, and penetrative rape. Sexual relations were often considered to be the women’s ‘duty’ and were viewed as part of an exchange in the relationship. Sex for some women was the ‘price’ for ‘keeping the peace’. If women resisted they were often accused of having sex with other people. The most extreme cases of sexual abuse involved women being beaten unconscious, then raped by their partners and their friends while being videotaped; the tape was then shown by their partners to their friends.

- *Verbal abuse*

A total of 89% of callers experienced frequent verbal abuse, often described as the most pervasive and damaging form of abuse in the long term. Verbal attacks on women focussed on their intelligence, sexuality, body image and capacity as a parent and a wife. Women were commonly referred to as ‘stupid’, ‘slut’, ‘whore’, ‘fat’, ‘ugly’ and a ‘lousy mother’. Women were often compared unfavourably with other women. Mothers were often blamed for their children’s behaviour, which was considered to be the result of poor and inadequate mothering. The themes of the verbal assaults were mainly commonly held views of how femininity should be demonstrated.

- *Emotional abuse*

Emotional abuse was reported by 84% of all callers. Emotional abuse involved attribution of blame and guilt to women for problems in the relationship; constant comparisons with other women, which affected victims’ self-esteem; emotional withdrawal, such as long periods of silence; sporadic ‘sulking’ and withdrawal of any interest and engagement with the partner.

- *Social abuse*

Social abuse was reported by 67% of callers. Frequently reported forms of social abuse included the systematic isolation of women from family and friends. Techniques included ongoing rudeness to family and friends that gradually resulted in their withdrawal. Alternatively, women discontinued contact with family or friends because this contact triggered abuse from the perpetrator. Other means by which women were socially isolated included being moved to new towns or to the country, where they knew nobody and were not allowed to go out and meet people. In some cases, women were physically prevented from leaving the home and were

virtually kept 'prisoners'. Other forms of abuse included control of transport, control of keys and stalking.

- *Economic abuse*

Economic deprivation was reported by most women. This included complete control of all money by perpetrators, no access to bank accounts, inadequate 'allowances' given to women and, if they worked, women's wages were used for all household expenses, while their partners' wages were used completely on themselves. In many instances the perpetrator controlled all access to food, with food being locked in cupboards and, in some instances, women and children going hungry.

<sup>18</sup> The types of abuse described by male victims in the South Australian study are listed below.

- *Physical abuse*

The physical abuse experienced by men who said they were victims included:

- direct assault;
- having saliva spat in the face, being scratched, having hair pulled;
- having pots thrown at them;
- being rushed at, having to push the attacker away, being pushed to the ground;
- being kicked in the ribs and kidneys; being bashed, punched, regularly hit and kicked;
- being choked; and
- being threatened with a knife.

Sexual abuse was identified by one man, however what he described was not similar to the experiences of most women.

- *Verbal and emotional abuse*

Men who reported emotional and verbal abuse said the abuse frequently involved sexual references. These included:

- one caller who suffered from impotence and felt abused by the demands of his 'highly sexed' female partner's sexual jealousy, such as constant accusations and interrogation about other women, friends, neighbours; and
- one caller who reported that his partner tried to manipulate him by making claims that he sexually abused the children.

Other forms of verbal and emotional abuse included:

- being told that he was 'no good', 'hopeless', 'useless'; being put down; being ridiculed;
- being unfavourably compared with other men;
- the partner having an 'instantaneous temper', which would 'just occur in a flash'; and
- the partner having moody, bitchy behaviour—'she used to leave and go to her sister's'.

- *Social and financial abuse*

Few of the callers experienced abuse at a social level, but some of those who identified as victims reported:

- being denied a social life—'she went out without me' (he was from New Zealand and had no family or friends here);
- that his partner's abusive behaviour extended into the social sphere—'It wasn't just me' (she also expressed her temper to the neighbours);
- being financially controlled by one partner, who would only allow the victim \$1 per fortnight from his disability pension; and
- having a partner who would spend money irresponsibly when in a rage.

<sup>19</sup> Johnson, M, 'Patriarchal terrorism and common couple violence: two forms of violence against women', *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 57, May 1995, 283–94.

## *Similarities and differences between male and female victims*

In the South Australian study, the similarities between male and female victims of domestic violence included:

- the reasons they remained in a relationship where there was violence and abuse;
- the triggers for violent and abusive incidents; and
- feelings of shame and embarrassment associated with the disclosure of the violence.

The ways in which male victims' experiences of domestic violence differed from females' were:

- males reported that they were not living in an ongoing state of fear of the perpetrator;
- males did not have prior experiences of violent relationships, and
- males rarely experienced post-separation violence and, in the one reported case, it was far less severe than in male-to-female violence.

## *Gender and power as factors in domestic violence*

Research into domestic violence usually falls into two categories:

- *violence against women* research, which is generally conducted by feminist researchers, and which focuses on 'the perpetrator and . . . the systematic, intentional nature of this form of violence';<sup>19</sup> and
- *family* research, which does not assume that the violence is carried out mainly by men against women, and which is usually produced in surveys that count various forms of violent behaviour.

These two categories of research are based on different theories of domestic violence. Violence against women research assumes that domestic violence is gender based and leads to the continuing oppression of women through male power and control. In contrast, family research does not assume a gender bias in violence between couples, or that the violence is necessarily about power and control over women. Family researchers often see abuse and violence as part of family conflict.

One researcher argues that family researchers' population surveys that use the CTS to count the extent of conflict and violence between couples are unlikely to include accurate self-reports from some perpetrators and victims. Consequently, more severe forms of domestic violence are less likely to be reported, particularly if the violence is current at the time of the survey.

*Men who systematically terrorise their wives would hardly be likely to agree to participate in such a survey, and the women whom they beat would probably be terrified at the possibility that their husband might find out that they had answered such questions.*<sup>20</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Johnson, M, 'Patriarchal terrorism and common couple violence: two forms of violence against women', *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 57, May 1995, 289.

Family researchers tend to concentrate on issues other than the context of domestic violence, and gender and power. For this reason their findings cannot be readily compared to the findings of violence against women researchers, for whom these issues are central.

In 1997, a prominent family researcher acknowledged the need to consider the impact of violence in couples. He saw that physical assaults are not necessarily the most damaging type of abuse and that verbal aggression can be far more damaging, a view that is supported by the 1998 South Australian study.<sup>21</sup> The 1997 research also recognised that findings based on criminal justice system data, or the experiences of women in shelters for battered women, show different aspects of domestic assault to those seen in the CTS data. It acknowledged that the violence revealed in the CTS surveys is

<sup>21</sup> Straus, M, 'Physical assaults by women partners: a major social problem', in *Women, Men and Gender: Ongoing Debates* (ed MR Walsh), Yale University Press, New Haven & London, 1997, 210–21.

*relatively minor and relatively infrequent, whereas most of the violence in official statistics is chronic and severe and involves injuries that need medical attention. These two types of violence probably have different etiologies and probably require different types of intervention.*<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Straus, M, 'Physical assaults by women partners: a major social problem', in *Women, Men and Gender: Ongoing Debates* (ed MR Walsh), Yale University Press, New Haven & London, 1997, 210–21.

This research concluded by noting that the 'fact that assaults by women produce far less injury is a critical difference' as is the 'greater physical, financial and emotional injury' suffered by women. The key point for policy makers and others involved in decisions about domestic violence is that many sources of data must be examined to gain an overall picture of domestic violence. These include family conflict or violence studies; violence against women research, such as phone-ins for women; and police or social services data.



Although there is some evidence that both men and women engage in abusive behaviour in heterosexual relationships, the nature and consequence of women's violence is *not* equivalent to men's violence in the following ways:

- men's violence is more severe;
- women are more likely to be killed by current and former male partners than by anyone else;
- most male homicides are committed by males in public places as a result of alcohol-related arguments;
- the main reasons men kill their female partners are desertion, the ending of a relationship, and jealousy. However, studies of wives who kill their husbands reveal that there is a history of marital violence in more than 70% of the cases and over half of the husband killings occur in response to an immediate threat or attack by the husband;
- some studies suggest that women's violence is more likely to be self-defence where the male partner is violent;
- men's violence towards women is most often an attempt to control, coerce, humiliate or dominate by generating fear and intimidation. However, women's violence is more often an expression of frustration in response to their dependence or stress, or their refusal to accept a less powerful position; and
- most women whose partners are violent live in fear before, during and after separation from them. However, male victims are far less likely to be afraid or intimidated, and are more likely to be angry.



## CONCLUSION

Violence of any kind, carried out by males or females, is clearly unacceptable. Answers to questions about whether or not men and women are equally violent or suffer the results equally in heterosexual relationships will depend on the focus of the research, the definitions of violence applied, and the types of research used. The collected research shows that both men and women can be victims of violence. Most researchers agree though, that men understate and underreport their use of severe forms of violence, and that far more women than men live in fear of their abusive partners.

For domestic violence research to be relevant it must take into account the social and cultural background and the diversity of people's experience. There is a need for more comprehensive ways of doing research that move away from comparing men and women and towards exploring the history, background, reasons, meanings and results of violence for all involved. Understanding the complexities of domestic violence requires a multi-method approach that combines research into the extent of violence with looking at its background, nature and other characteristics.

It is obvious that studies of domestic violence produce different results depending on the way the research is conducted. Research that records only the extent of domestic violence ignores its social, political and economic background, and especially the fact that men often have more power than women in intimate relationships. When domestic violence research doesn't consider such factors, the differences between men's and women's experiences of violence are ignored.

Evidence also strongly suggests that men are more violent than women in intimate relationships, and that women are not equally likely to be violent in this situation. The use and effects of violence differ both in extent and nature for males and females. Studies that do examine the nature of violence suggest that the majority of females surveyed—and relatively few (if any) males—with violent partners experience control, fear and intimidation on a daily basis. Moreover, the claim that men and women are equally violent in intimate relationships is placed in doubt by studies that have demonstrated men's monopoly on the use of violence in other social situations.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Dobash, RE, Dobash, RP, Daly, M, & Wilson, M, 'The myth of sexual symmetry in marital violence', *Social Problems* 39 (1), 1992, 71–91.