

## He Hits, She Hits: Assessing debates regarding men's and women's experiences of domestic violence

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## Domestic / family violence

- A problem largely of violence by men, against women and children?



## Domestic violence

- A pattern of behaviours, linked by power and control
- Physical violence typically is accompanied by other forms of abusive and oppressive behaviour. Such as;
  - Threats of violence, intimidation, sexual assault, coercion, emotional abuse, financial control, insults and mind-games, control and isolation.
  - And minimising or denying the violence, refusing to accept responsibility, and blaming the victim.

## Coercive Controlling Violence



## The claim of 'gender symmetry'

The claim that men and women assault each other at equal rates and with equal effects.

Rates of DV have been measured using two bodies of data;

- Crime victimisation studies (based on large-scale data e.g. from household and crime surveys and police statistics).
  - These find gender *asymmetry*.
- 'Family conflict' studies measuring aggressive behaviour in married and cohabiting couples.
  - These find gender *symmetry*.

## Defining and measuring domestic violence

- A systematic pattern of power and control?
- Or a set of aggressive acts?

## The Personal Safety Survey

- The numbers:
  - 73,800 females and 21,200 males experienced at least one incident of physical assault by a current or previous other-sex partner in the last 12 months
- So is each of these individuals a victim of domestic violence? And are males one in four of domestic violence victims?
- What these numbers don't tell us...

## The 'Conflict Tactics Scale'

- The source of most claims to gender symmetry in DV
- An acts-focused approach.
- Focuses on 'counting the blows':
  - "Have you or your spouse, in the last year, ever committed... [a range of acts]."

## Methodological problems with the CTS

- Asks only about acts, and ignores their impact, meaning, and history (who initiated it, who got hurt, what has happened before, etc.)
- Leaves out sexual abuse, etc.
- Relies only on one partner's reports, despite poor interspousal reliability
- Uses samples shaped by high rates of refusal particularly among individuals perpetrating or suffering severe DV
- Draws only on married and intact couples and excludes violence after separation

## The Conflict Tactics Scale

- The CTS thus *produces* the very claim it is meant to test.
- Other data finds strong gender asymmetries.

## Different kinds of violence

- *Intimate terrorism / Coercive controlling violence*
  - More severe violence, used by one partner (i.e., asymmetrical), plus other controlling tactics, to assert or restore power and authority (i.e., instrumental). Tends to escalate, and injuries are more likely.
- *Situational couple violence*
  - Minor violence, by both partners, which is expressive (emotional) rather than instrumental. Does not escalate over time, and injuries are rare.

## Types of violence *cont'd*

- *Intimate terrorism*: a violent and controlling individual with a partner who is neither
  - In heterosexual relationships, is largely by men against women
- *Situational couple violence*: neither are violent and controlling
- *Violent resistance*: typically by a woman to a male partner's violent and controlling behaviour

### Patterns of violence in the Personal Safety Survey

- If Johnson is right...
- Three-quarters of partner violence in the PSS is situational couple violence.
- Of the women reporting partner violence in the PSS:
  - Three quarters are experiencing situational couple violence.
  - One quarter are experiencing intimate terrorism

### Patterns of violence in the PSS *cont'd*

- Of the men:
  - 5 -10% are experiencing intimate terrorism
- Of all people living with intimate terrorism (domestic violence in the 'strong sense') in the last year:
  - Women are 90-95% of victims.
- Female victims of intimate terrorism are 8-17 times as common as male victims.

### Contrasts in women's and men's experience of domestic violence

- Women are far more likely than men to
  - Be subjected to frequent, prolonged, and extreme violence
  - Be sexually assaulted
  - Sustain injuries
  - Fear for their lives
  - Experience a range of controlling tactics
  - Experience violence after separation.

### Gender contrasts: experience

- Frequency:
  - Women are more likely than men to experience repeated, and frequent, incidents of violence, whether from current or former partners.
- Sexual violence:
  - Women are more likely than men to be sexually assaulted by a partner.
  - A greater proportion of the intimate partner violence women than men experience involves sexual violence.

### Gender contrasts: impact

- Perceptions of the violence:
  - Women subjected to violence by their male partners feel frightened, helpless, trapped, etc.
  - Men are 'not bothered', see it as insignificant or ludicrous or even admirable, and see its impact as largely inconsequential
- Women show higher levels of fear than men of their partners' violence
  - Not because of greater fragility, but because the violence is worse.

### Gender contrasts: separation

- Women are more likely than men to:
  - Separate in the context of violence;
  - Experience violence during separation;
  - Experience an increase in violence during separation.
- Women and men stay with their abuser for different reasons.

### Gender contrasts: separation *cont'd*

- Women are more likely than men to relocate, and to lose property or assets.
- Some men's sense of victimisation is tied up with separation, family law, etc.

### Gender contrasts: Perpetration

- Women's perpetration of violence is much more often than men's in self-defence.
- Women are more likely to perpetrate partner violence out of emotional expression, self-defence, or retaliation. Men are more likely to perpetrate... for instrumental reasons.
  - Although women also may use violence to gain or maintain power.

### Gender contrasts: Reporting

- Both men and women contribute to:
  - the underestimation of men's violence against women; and
  - the overestimation of women's violence against men.
- Interspousal agreement on domestic violence is low to moderate.
- Men are less likely than women to report their own perpetration of violence.

### Gender contrasts: reporting *cont'd*

- Are male victims of domestic violence more or less likely than female victims to report their experience? There is mixed evidence.
  - There is some evidence that males are *more* likely than females to report.
- Lower proportions of men may report physical aggression by partners because they do not see it as serious or threatening.

### Anti-feminist backlash

- Anti-feminist men's and fathers' rights groups are not motivated by a genuine concern for male victims of violence:
  1. They focus on violence to men *by women*, while men are most at risk from other men.
  2. They undermine the protections available to victims of family violence and the sanctions applied to perpetrators, thus harming female and male victims alike.
  3. They condone and excuse men's violence, use it as evidence of men's victimhood, and attack community and media efforts to respond to and prevent violence against women.

### Men's Health Australia's "One In Three" campaign

- In many ways, a campaign *against* efforts to address men's violence against women:
  - Neglects male victims of family violence by other males.
  - Neglects male-male violence more widely.
  - Slippage between all forms of family violence against males and violence against men by adult female partners (domestic violence / IPV)
  - Tries to degender violence.
  - Tries to undermine campaigns against men's violence against women. Plays a spoiler role.

## Conclusion

- Domestic violence (coercive controlling violence / intimate terrorism) is less common than we have claimed.
- Domestic violence is largely a problem of men's violence against women.
- If we do not pay attention to both women's and men's experiences of victimisation and perpetration, we will commit errors of fact, of theory, and of intervention.

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## Further reading and resources

- A collection of journal articles on gender and domestic violence:  
<http://www.xyonline.net/content/domestic-violence-and-gender-xy-collection>
- Dr Michael Flood's publications:  
<http://www.xyonline.net/category/authors/michael-flood>