

**SHIFTING PUBLIC POLICY DIRECTION:  
GENDER-FOCUSED VERSUS BI-DIRECTIONAL  
INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE**

A Report Prepared by

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## INTRODUCTION

Popular conceptions of violence as gender-neutral are increasingly becoming “common sense” in Canada (Minaker & Snider, 2006, p. 755). However, gender-neutral discourse distorts research on woman abuse, violence against same-sex partners, and on violence against men. The move to gender-neutral or bi-directional language is not merely semantic. Rather, it reflects an intense political struggle to typify violence against intimate partners that has serious pragmatic implications. Indeed, the endorsement of terminology effectively advocates certain responses to violence and abuse and precludes others.

As this report documents, gender-neutral language misrepresents research on the nature of violence, impeding development of appropriate empirical work, policy and programs. Instead of making the discourse more inclusive, gender-neutral language promotes understandings of woman abuse as mutual, reciprocal, or bi-directional, recalling the days before battered women’s advocates created shelters and fought for legal reforms, and scholars conducted hundreds of studies documenting survivor experiences.

Proponents of gender neutral language equate woman abuse with violence against men by obscuring significant sex differences in violence against intimates such as homicide, injury, and sexual assault. The characterization of violence as sex-symmetrical is unwarranted because of the magnitude of men’s violence against intimates, as well as the gendered cultural environment that propagates violence against women (General Assembly, 2006). The main objective of this brief report, then, is to evaluate claims about sex-symmetry.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Debates about terminology surrounding woman abuse are ongoing and have significant implications for policy and practice.
- Recent efforts to promote the use of gender-neutral language selectively cite research to incorrectly characterize violence as bi-directional, mutual, or sex symmetrical.
- It is impossible to make valid claims about symmetry, reciprocity, or mutuality based on the decontextualized counts of acts used in recent Canadian studies.
- The Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) and similar quantitative measures used to support symmetry claims are controversial and fail to assess meaning, motive and contexts of violence.
- The imposition of gender-neutral language does not make discourses on violence and abuse more inclusive.
- Canadian government research finds marked sex differences in women and men's experiences of violence.
- To make claims about sex-symmetry, it is necessary to ignore research findings on context, injury, homicide, sexual assault.

## CHANGES IN CANADIAN DISCOURSES ON WOMAN ABUSE OVER TIME<sup>1</sup>

*Prior to the 1970s, there was no name for violence against women by their husbands or partners (Denham & Gillespie, 1999, p. 6).*

Although there has been episodic concern with various types of violence against women in Canadian history, women physically abused by male intimate partners and acquaintances were not of interest until recently to social scientists, practitioners, politicians, and the general public. It was, after all, only 40 years ago that an exhaustive bibliography on wife beating could be written on an index card (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2002). Since then, predominantly because of feminist efforts, many residents of Ontario and other Canadian provinces are paying considerable attention to the various harms women experience during and after intimate relationships. One of the key results of this extensive work has been the reduction of some persistent injurious myths (e.g., only poor women are beaten). Yet, at the same time, some prominent researchers, journalists, and even some well known Canadian politicians continue to attract much publicity with arguments that include other highly problematic conceptions about the nature of violence against intimate partners.

What Martin D. Schwartz and Walter DeKeseredy stated 16 years ago still holds true today: “Right now, there is an important battle being waged over the nature of women’s behaviour and its role in woman abuse” (1993, p. 249). For example, while many people from different walks of life continue to use terms such as “woman abuse,” “violence against women,” and “male-to-female violence,” there are also many people who fervently oppose these names and contend that we should use gender-neutral terms like “family violence” or

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<sup>1</sup> This section includes modified sections of material published previously by DeKeseredy and MacLeod (1997) and DeKeseredy and Schwartz (2003).

“intimate partner violence” (IPV). Their rationale is heavily based on some Canadian national survey data, which, at first glance, show that violence in intimate, heterosexual relationships is sex-symmetrical. Of course, there are government agencies and community groups who also favour the labels “family violence” or “IPV” because they claim that these terms are more inclusive (Denham & Gillespie, 1999). Regardless of the reasons why people use gender-neutral terms, such language suggests that violence results from ordinary, everyday social interactions in the family or other intimate relationships that have gone wrong and that women are just as responsible for the problem as men (DeKeseredy, 2009; Ellis & DeKeseredy, 1996, Kurz, 1989).

Over the past 40 years, there have been significant shifts in the generally accepted definitions of woman abuse, and there have been passionate disagreements along the way.<sup>2</sup> Even the term used here, “woman abuse,” is relatively recent. Before 1970, in Canada and other Western industrialized countries, there was no name for violence against women by their husbands or other intimate partners. Then, in the 1970s, feminists and others began to talk about violence against women and created the first emergency shelters for abused women. In the early and mid-1970s, women working at the community level used the terms “wife beating” and “wife battering” to describe the problem (DeKeseredy & MacLeod, 1997; Walker, 1990). The term “battered” was borrowed from legal references to “assault and battery.” “Wife beating” referred to the way in which women who had been physically abused by their husbands might describe their own experiences.

Despite this history, gender-neutral definitions are not new. From the beginning, the grassroots naming process competed with the more official naming. Articles written by social workers, counsellors, and health professionals and the conferences for these professionals

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<sup>2</sup> See DeKeseredy (2009) for an overview of the key debates surround definitions of woman abuse.

subsumed men's violence against female partners under the term "family violence." As early as 1977, in British Columbia, the United Way funded a public symposium concerned with "family violence." This broad label was adopted by governments and has persisted up to the present. For example, in 1982, the federal government established a National Clearinghouse on Family Violence (NCFV) and in 1986, Health and Welfare Canada created the Family Violence Prevention Division. Around the same time, however, many feminists replaced the term wife battering with woman abuse to reflect the fact that not only married women are assaulted by male partners. Further, the term woman abuse more accurately reflects the fact that many women suffer from a variety of male behaviours that include physical violence, psychological abuse, economic abuse such as denying women money even if they earn wages, harming pets or possessions to which they have an attachment, and stalking (Adams, Sullivan, Bybee, & Greeson, 2008; DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2009; Stark, 2007).

Today, "woman abuse" and "violence against women" are still commonly used by many Canadian feminist scholars, practitioners, and activists. However, due in large part to the ongoing efforts of anti-feminist groups and other organizations to assert that the high rates of woman abuse uncovered by major Canadian national surveys conducted in the early 1990s<sup>3</sup> are greatly exaggerated and that women are as violent as men, a growing number of Canadian researchers (e.g., Dutton, 2006), policy analysts, and others now insist that gender-neutral or bi-directional terms are more appropriate.

### **SEX-SYMMETRY CLAIMS IN CANADA**

On June 26, 2002, the *Globe and Mail*'s web site announced: "Men as Likely to Suffer Spousal Abuse, Statscan Says" (Lawlor, 2002, p. 1). Because Statistics Canada

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<sup>3</sup> See the Canadian National Survey of Woman Abuse in University/College Dating (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 1998a) and Statistics Canada's Violence Against Women Survey (Johnson, 1996).

(Statscan) is seen as the source for official statistics on issues important to Canadians, any research they undertake on violent victimization is bound to be very influential (Denham & Gillespie, 1998). Briefly, the story reports on a study that used a telephone interview technology to ask a national sample of Canadians slightly modified versions of items included in the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS). Known as the 1999 General Social Survey on Victimization (GSS), this national study found that eight percent of 14,269 women and seven percent of 11,607 men reported at least one incident of intimate partner violence committed by a current or ex-spouse between 1994 and 1999 (Statistics Canada, 2002).<sup>4</sup>

As was the case when Statistics Canada first released the 1999 GSS findings in 2000 (see Pottie Bunge, 2000), these results were seized upon by some journalists and many anti-feminist groups to support claims that women are as violent as men and that Canada is seeing a resurgence of what Steinmetz (1977-78) referred to as the “battered husband syndrome” (Jiwani, 2000). For example, Earl Silverman, Program Coordinator for the Calgary-based advocacy group Family of Men Support Society told the *Globe and Mail* that Statistics Canada’s findings show “that there has been a severe bias against men in the past not considering them as victims” and “[t]o try to deny the other side of the coin reduces the credibility of the first side” (cited in Foss, 2002, p. 8).

Statistics Canada’s 2004 GSS uncovered similarly sex-symmetrical findings for 1999-2004, with six percent of men and seven percent of women reporting being victimized by a spouse (Statistics Canada, 2005). This study, too, is used to support claims of bi-directionality or gender-neutrality of abuse, and it also employed a rendition of the CTS. DeKeseredy and Schwartz (2003) found that regardless of its attempt to remain relatively autonomous from political parties and groups, Statistics Canada has indirectly contributed to

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<sup>4</sup> See DeKeseredy and Schwartz (2003) for an in-depth critique of Statistics Canada’s 1999 GSS.

making terms like spousal violence a central “part of our everyday popular lexicon” and its recent surveys have been “appropriated and exploited by a variety of antifeminist pundits and organizations” (Hammer, 2002, p. 111). For example, University of British Columbia psychologist Donald Dutton (2006, p. ix) states that, “in Canada and the United States, women use violence in intimate relationships to the same extent as men, for the same reasons, and with largely the same results.”<sup>5</sup>

In a more recent example, the NCFV’s January 2009 E-Bulletin “focuses on intimate partner abuse against men, one of the least understood issues in the field of family violence” (2009). The newsletter highlights NCFV’s report *Intimate Partner Abuse Against Men* (2004), which emphasizes GSS data showing that:

almost equal proportions of men and women (7% and 8% respectively) had been the victims of intimate partner physical and psychological abuse (18% and 19% respectively). These findings were consistent with several earlier studies which reported equal rates of abuse by women and men in intimate relationships. (p. 1)

*Intimate Partner Abuse Against Men* dismisses women’s greater injuries caused by violence and studies documenting other sex differences, including research distinguishing offensive and defensive violence. For example, the NCFV states, “[s]ome scholars suggest that the motives for intimate partner abuse against men by women may differ from those for abuse against women by men, and that women suffer more severe injuries than men” (2004, p. 1).<sup>6</sup> Despite extensive documentation of such differences, the report characterizes women’s and men’s violence as “comparable,” and asserts that, “[i]t is also important for the perpetrators of intimate partner abuse – men or women – to recognize that violence in any

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<sup>5</sup> See DeKeseredy and Dragiewicz (2007) for an in-depth critique of Dutton’s (2006) recent work.

<sup>6</sup> Internal citations omitted.

form is both morally and legally wrong” (2004, p. 1).<sup>7</sup> Many people would agree with Minaker and Snider (2006) who argue that:

focusing on “female aggressors” ignores the damaging violence men inflict on other men and on women, obscures who is doing what to whom, and undermines the ideological climate feminists struggle(d) to create, wherein instances of male domination, gender inequality, and systemic violence are called into question. (p. 756)

NCFV’s report and the E-Bulletin on intimate partner abuse against men are contemporary examples of this process. Most readers lacking expertise on woman abuse research would probably not realize that respondents were not asked questions about the context of the incidents, including whether these acts were defensive or offensive. Nor would many readers likely detect that the types of acts and outcomes reported by men and women are significantly different, or that the similar prevalence numbers are generated only when serious forms of violence like sexual assault and homicide are omitted. Thus, the bar for alleged comparability is very low.

Definitions of violence in intimate relationships are important and warrant considerable scrutiny because of the power conveyed by scientific and political authority (Muehlenhard, Powch, Phelps, & Giusti, 1992). Certainly, the ways definitions are drawn up have major effects on research techniques, policies, and ultimately, the lives of many people (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2001; Ellis, 1987). Kurz (1989) argues that:

Researchers, by providing statistical evidence documenting the extent of wife abuse have played a critical role in making it a social issue. Social scientists have been particularly important in surveying this problem. Their statistics on the extent of

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<sup>7</sup> Internal citations omitted.

battering are cited to legitimate concern in books, professional journals, and the popular press. (p. 489)

While advocates for battered women struggled to change woman abuse from an invisible, private family matter to a major public concern requiring immediate intervention, the contemporary use of gender-neutral language has the potential to reverse these changes by again obscuring women's particular needs, interests and experiences (Sinclair, 2003).

### **CRITIQUES OF RESEARCH CITED TO PROMOTE GENDER-NEUTRAL PERSPECTIVES**

In Canada, proponents of the sexual symmetry of violence thesis typically refer to recent national federal government survey data generated by using renditions of the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS). The CTS was developed in the 1970s by University of New Hampshire sociologist Murray Straus (1979) to study violence within families. Applied to violence in intimate heterosexual relationships, this measure and the more recent CTS-2 (Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996) solicit information from men and women about the various tactics they used to resolve conflicts in their relationships. Most versions of the CTS consist of at least 18 items that measure at least three different ways of handling interpersonal conflict in relationships: reasoning, verbal aggression (referred to by some researchers as psychological abuse), and violence. Although widely used, the CTS is a highly controversial measure and must be administered with caution.<sup>8</sup>

Claims of sex-symmetry are deceptive for several reasons. First, conducted by Statistics Canada, the 1999 and 2004 GSS provide only raw counts of violent acts and thus miss the fact that much male and female violence is used for different reasons (DeKeseredy,

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<sup>8</sup> See DeKeseredy and Schwartz (1998b) for a more in-depth analysis of the strengths and limitations of the CTS and the CTS-2.

2009; Jiwani, 2000). As demonstrated by studies that add context, meaning, and motive measures to the CTS, a common cause of women's violence is self-defence (DeKeseredy, 2007), while men more typically use violence to control their partners (DeKeseredy & Dragiewicz, 2007). Therefore, York University sociologist Desmond Ellis reminds us that, "[i]gnoring context, meaning and motive is misinforming...[a]nd not separating different types of violence is misleading" (cited in Foss, 2002, p. 2).

Of course, some women strike some men, sometimes with the intent to injure (National Clearinghouse on Family Violence, 2004; Tutty, 1999). However, the CTS or other crude counts of behaviour alone cannot accurately determine gender variations in intimate violence because of the following:

- The CTS excludes measures of the meaning, motive, and context of acts (Straus, 2007).
- Males are more likely to underreport violence perpetration (DeKeseredy, 2009; Edleson & Brygger, 1996; Heckert & Goldof, 2000; Hilton, Harris, & Rice, 2000; Szinovacz & Egley, 1995).
- Females are more likely to over-report violence perpetration (Hilton, Harris & Rice, 2000; Szinovacz, 1983; Szinovacz & Egley, 1995).
- Abusers regularly minimize, deny, and justify their violence and abuse (Anderson & Umberson, 2001; Buchbinder & Eisikovits, 2004; Heckert & Gondolf, 2000; Henning & Holdford, 2006; Ptacek, 1990; Totten, 2003).
- The CTS measures only conflict-instigated violence and ignores male violence used to control women or violence that may not stem from any single identifiable cause (e.g., dispute, difference, or spat) (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 1998b).

- The CTS excludes several types of abusive behaviour, such as forced isolation separation assault, stalking, threats to take the children (Jiwani, 2000).
- Surveys based on self-reports of victimization necessarily omit homicide, familicide, and homicide-suicide.

In addition to using GSS data and similar findings to support the claim of the bi-directionality of violence,<sup>9</sup> proponents of sex-symmetry artificially narrow the definition of violence between intimates to obscure injurious behaviours that display marked sex asymmetry, such as sexual assault, strangulation, separation/divorce assault, stalking and homicide. Rather than an unacceptable or hysterical broadening of the definition of violence, these behaviours are commonly part of abused women's experiences (DeKeseredy & Dragiewicz, 2007; DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2009).

Criticisms of the CTS and data on forms of woman abuse that it does not measure are typically not recognized by supporters of bi-directional definitions, including Canadian politicians who were members of the 1998 Special Joint Committee on Child Custody and Access (SJC). For example, the SJC concluded that, "because of the existence of violence against men, the Committee would not recommend that family law or divorce legislation employ a gender-specific definition of family violence" (Pearson & Gallaway, 1998, p. 81). Prior to coming to this conclusion, the SJC had access to Canadian national survey data showing that only a distinct minority of female undergraduates reported that they had initiated a physical attack since leaving high school and that much of the violence reported by women was in self-defence or fighting back (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 1998b). Walter DeKeseredy publicly presented these findings to the SJC, but they and similar results

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<sup>9</sup> See Archer (2000) and Straus (2005) for reviews of major studies that support the sexual symmetry of violence thesis.

uncovered by others researchers (e.g., Saunders, 1986) were not included in the SJC's final report and they are ignored by prominent critics of feminist research on intimate violence (e.g., Dutton, 2006; Mills, 2003). The marginalization of research findings documenting the differential impact of women's and men's violence against intimates by the SJC is one illustration of how the use of gender-neutral terms does not translate into policies that accurately reflect the research.

### **MISUSE AND MISINTERPRETATION OF RESEARCH**

As Holly Johnson argues in Statistics Canada's report *Measuring Violence Against Women: Statistical Trends 2006*, "Decision-makers require a clear understanding of the nature and severity of social problems in order to develop effective responses" (2006, p. 7). The preceding sections indicate that even studies cited to support symmetry claims do not find that women and men are equally victimized. Given, then, that Statistics Canada's own research finds significant and substantive differences between women's and men's experiences of violence, it is necessary to ask why has gender-neutral language been so readily adopted in Canada?

There are two primary contexts for the increasing use of bi-directional terms. The first is efforts to render discourses on woman abuse "gender-neutral" so that they will ostensibly be more inclusive of same-sex violence and violence against men. While there is undoubtedly a need for more services, including those specifically targeting the different populations at risk for abuse,<sup>10</sup> simply excluding gender does not make services more inclusive. For example, lesbian survivors of violence criticize the ways that some existing services for heterosexual women fail to meet their needs, advocating for materials and

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<sup>10</sup> See Brownridge (2009) for recent Canadian empirical work on under-researched and underserved groups of women harmed by violence in intimate relationships.

programs that explicitly and specifically target lesbian women (Girshick, 2002). NCFV's own discussion paper on gay men and abuse indicates that patriarchal gender norms are key impediments to effectively addressing the violence (Kirkland, 2004). Hence, there are calls for language and resources based on the specific needs of the community. Scholars and advocates working on same-sex intimate partner violence explicitly reject a generic model that obscures patriarchal and heterosexist gender norms.

Anti-feminist groups claim that men's low rate of reporting violence to police, service providers, and to medical personnel is due to the stigma of being unable to control their female partners and therefore being perceived as effeminate or gay. The assertion that men are less likely to report violence or abuse perpetrated by an intimate is not supported by the research. One early Ontario study found that men were more likely than women to press charges against intimates and less likely to drop charges once filed. In the study sample, there were seventeen times as many female victims as male victims. Twenty-two percent of the female victims laid charges and nearly forty percent of the men did (Kincaid, 1982, p. 76). Of those who filed charges, men were less likely to drop them than women, with 2.8% of men and 5% of women dropping the charges (Kincaid, 1982, p. 77). Dobash, Dobash, Wilson and Daly note that claims that men underreport violence by female intimates relative to women are undocumented, but multiple studies have documented women's low reporting rates and the reasons for them (1992, p. 76). Even if the research did support the notion that men underreport victimization relative to women, the use of gender-neutral terms cannot solve this alleged problem. The above examples point to the need for discourses and policies which explicitly challenge patriarchal, heterosexist norms for gender and sexuality rather than simply ignoring them.

Efforts to repudiate feminism are the second context of the push for language that ignores gender (Minaker & Snider, 2006). Since woman abuse is one of the most graphic manifestations of gender inequality (General Assembly, 2006), it is one area where women's perspectives are widely acknowledged in public policy and scholarship (Dragiewicz, 2008). Anti-feminists resent linking woman abuse to patriarchy and seek to separate discussions of violence from analyses of gender inequality (Lupri, 2005). Some scholars object to studies of violence and abuse that emphasize the importance of gender, power, and context, claiming feminists have "created a climate of fear that inhibits research" for those who continue to do decontextualized counts of behaviours (Munro, 2008, p. 35). The antipathy for gender-conscious research is evident in the explicit attacks against feminism by anti-feminist scholars and activists. They do not just advocate more attention to male victims (they usually ignore same sex victims after claiming that abuse in lesbian couples proves women are just as violent as men), they demand the renunciation of feminism and the research, laws, and programs they deem feminist (Dutton, 2006; Girard, 2009).

Use of gender-neutral terms frequently occurs alongside the characterization of "spousal violence" as typically mutual, minor, infrequent, and not resulting in injuries. Some anti-feminist scholars argue that, "intimate violence is a two-way street" (Lupri, 2005), best addressed privately and without criminal consequences (Dutton, 2006). However, this view does not accurately reflect the phenomenon of ongoing coercive control, battering, or abuse that public policy and programs were created to prevent and control (Stark, 2007). The idea of violence as mutual and minor mirrors the conceptualization of violence that preceded and necessitated the creation of special laws, policies, and services targeting woman abuse.

### *Typologies of Intimate Partner Violence and Abuse*

Some scholars attempt to bridge or explain the gap between gendered and gender-neutral theories of violence by offering typologies (Johnson, 2008; Johnson & Ferraro, 2000, Pence & Dasgupta, 2006). It may be useful to observe that the type of violence labelled as coercive control, woman abuse, battering, or intimate terrorism is qualitatively different than infrequent, non-injurious acts that invoke no fear or coercion. However, studies based on the CTS or other decontextualized measures provide no information that can be used to characterize incidents as representative of one type of violence or another. It is impossible to make accurate claims about the motives of violence based on numbers of acts, as Walter DeKeseredy publicly pointed out in his critique of Michael Johnson's typology of violence at the National Institute of Justice's Gender Symmetry of Violence Workshop (National Institute of Justice, 2000). Certainly, motivations for violent and controlling behaviour vary and even Johnson readily admitted that, "qualitative research and rich interview data would be necessary to thoroughly understand the meaning and social context" (cited in National Institute of Justice, 2000).

Another problem with Johnson's (2008) typology is that he claims to identify a very small number of cases that to him exemplify "mutual coercive control." In such cases, he contends that:

Both members of the couple are violent and controlling, each behaving in a manner that would identify him or her as an intimate terrorist if it weren't for the fact that their partner also seems to be engaged in the same sort of violent attempt to control the relationship (p. 12).

What makes this assertion highly problematic is that, as Evan Stark (2006) reminds us, while there is evidence that *some* women often use force to control their male partners, “they typically lack the social facility to impost comprehensive levels of deprivation, exploitation, and dominance found in coercive control. I have never encountered a case of coercive control with a female perpetrator and male victim” (p. 1024).

As of yet, typologies such as Johnson’s (2008) are speculative and their application is therefore premature. Moreover, some critics like Pence and Dasgupta (2006) caution that typologies are likely to be misused. They note that it is all too easy for abusers and their allies to paint individual incidents as “situational” or aberrant violence even when they are not, and that this can have life and death consequences. Although shelter staff and scholars recognize that not all violence is the same, and not all violence that takes place in the home is necessarily battering (Dasgupta, 2002, Osthoff, 2002), there is no tool that can discern whether an individual act is part of a broader pattern of coercive control. Accordingly, anti-violence advocates continue to call for assessments that place violence and abuse in the context of the relationship, family, community, culture, and history (Bonisteel & Green, 2005).

**RESEARCH FINDINGS ON SEX DIFFERENCES IN VIOLENCE AND ABUSE  
AGAINST INTIMATES AND FORMER INTIMATES**

Policymakers, scholars, practitioners, and others seeking to better understand violence and abuse and to improve prevention and control strategies should be aware of critiques of research used to support claims of sex-symmetry.<sup>11</sup> However, these critiques comprise only a small portion of the research landscape. Although some media reports focus on the alleged

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<sup>11</sup> For an overview, see Kimmel (2002).

symmetry documented in recent Canadian surveys, Statistics Canada's own official reports also document substantial differences in the amount and impact of violence experienced by women and men. The GSS and other incident-based measures of violence will never be able to discern the nature or meaning of individual acts in the absence of questions about meaning, motive, and context. Nonetheless, official Canadian government sources do find significant sex differences that should not be ignored.

### ***GSS Findings on Sex Differences***

*Family Violence in Canada, a Statistical Profile 2000* notes that eight percent of women and seven percent of men “experienced some type of violence by a partner during the previous 5 years” (Pottie Bunge & Locke, 2000, p. 5). The report also highlights several substantial sex differences often ignored by the media, including:

- Women were more likely than men to report “more severe” forms of violence.
- Women were more likely than men to report repeated victimization.
- Women were more likely than men to be injured by a partner.
- Women were more likely than men to report negative emotional consequences as a result of the violence.
- Women were more likely to experience forms of violence that came to the attention of the police.
- Women were much more likely to report fear that their lives were in danger (Pottie Bunge & Locke, 2000, p. 5).

Even a cursory glance at these findings indicates that the violence experienced by women and men is neither similar nor equivalent.

### *Crime Data Documenting Sex Differences*

Crime data are widely recognized as under-reporting violence and abuse by intimates. This is because crime data derived from police reports or other official sources (e.g., court records) describe only the minority of incidents that come to the attention of the criminal justice system. Mainstream crime and victimization surveys document a larger number of incidents, but consistently garner much lower reporting rates than studies specifically designed to measure sensitive issues like woman abuse and sexual assault (DeKeseredy, 2000, Johnson, 1998). In *Family Violence in Canada: A Statistical Profile 2008*, Bressan notes that GSS findings indicate that only 28% of what she terms “incidents of spousal abuse” are reported to police (p. 11). Bressan also points out that emotional, psychological, and economic abuse are not chargeable offences under the Canadian Criminal Code and are therefore excluded from official crime statistics (p.11).

Johnson (1998) illustrates the discrepancies in reporting across different official Canadian sources by comparing the numbers from police records, the GSS, and the Canadian Violence Against Women Survey (VAWS) in 1993. These discrepancies are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 – Number of assaults against women in 1993 recorded by police, the GSS and the VAWS

Source	Physical assault	Sexual assault
Police reports	46,800	15,200
GSS	107,500	316,000
VAWS	201,000	572,000

Table adapted from Johnson (1998, pp. 41-42).

Although each of these sources has limitations, the numbers underscore the importance of how methods shape findings. Statistics are never self-explanatory, and require contextualisation in order to facilitate proper interpretation. Unfortunately, decontextualized government survey data are often used to the exclusion of other data in misleading ways. While the above numbers greatly underestimate the incidence and prevalence of violence and abuse, they provide some information about the kinds of violence likely to come to the attention of police. Additional graphics illustrating marked sex differences in intimate partner homicide from *Family Violence in Canada: A Statistical Profile 2008* (Bressan, 2008) and *National Trends in Intimate Partner Homicides, 1974-2000* (Pottie Bunge, 2000) are reproduced in Appendix B.

Johnson's (2006) report *Measuring violence against women: Statistical trends 2006* also shows that women are more likely to be victims of stalking and sexual assault, and to experience substantial psychological impacts from the violence. These findings further demonstrate that violence and abuse are not the same for women and men. Table 2 summarizes some key sex differences in outcomes.

Table 2 – Sex Differences in Outcomes of Intimate Partner Violence

Outcome	% Female victims	% Male victims
Were physically injured	44	19
Received medical attention	13	2
Were hospitalized	10	2
Took time off daily activities	29	10
Experienced 10 or more assaults	21	11
Feared for their lives	34	10

Table adapted from Johnson (2006, p. 33).

Table 3 illustrates sex differences related to the demand for public services and intervention due to violence and abuse. It also highlights the availability of services to both sexes, as well as the disproportionate demand for services by abused women, including abused mothers.

Table 3 – Impact of Violence by Sex

Outcome	% Female victims	% Male victims
Used social services	47	20
Reported to police	36	17
Children witnessed violence against victim	40	25

Table adapted from Johnson (2006, p. 34).

### ***Sexual Assault***

Sexual assault is ignored to make claims about sex-symmetry, even though large- and small-scale Canadian surveys show that many women are hurt by a myriad of sexually

abusive behaviours (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 1998a; Johnson, 1996). Note, too, that Statistics Canada’s recent publications devote minimal attention to this form of violence, and only one question about spousal sexual assault was included in the 1999 GSS. Still, Table 4 shows that this rudimentary measure uncovered striking sex differences in sexual assault in current and former relationships.

Table 4– Number and Percentage of Women and Men Aged 15 Years and Over Who Reported Violence by a Current or Former Spouse

Perpetrator	% Female victims	% Male victims
Current partner	8	“Amount too small to be expressed”
Former partner	27	5

Table adapted from Pottie Bunge (2000, p. 13).

### ***Homicide***

Homicide, too, must be ignored in order to make sex-symmetry claims about violence. In Canada, women are five times more likely to be killed by intimates than are men. Statistics Canada found that in 2005, 83.7% of spousal homicide victims were female and 16.2% were male (Dauvergne & Li, 2006, p.7). While men’s greatest risk of homicide is from strangers and acquaintances, women’s is from current or former intimates. In 2005, 58% of female homicide victims and 10% of male homicide victims were killed by a current or former intimate partner (Dauvergne & Li, 2006, p.7). Obviously, these are significant sex differences, but even homicide rates are not self explanatory. Homicide reviews provide contextual data essential to understanding the numbers.

In Statistics Canada’s publication *National Trends in Intimate Partner Homicides, 1974-2000*, Pottie Bunge (2002) reports that over 75% of the approximately 2,600 spousal homicides in Canada between 1974 and 2000 have been against women. Pottie Bunge notes

that homicides of women and men have been decreasing since 1974, with dramatic decreases for women (62%) and men (55%). Pottie Bunge (2002) also observes that:

Many recent societal changes may have contributed to the declines in spousal homicide rates including the changing nature of intimate relationships, increasing gender equality, legislative changes, policy and procedural changes such as specialized domestic violence courts, training of criminal justice personnel and increasing availability of resources for victims (p. 1).

Although it is impossible to know the precise causes of homicide decreases, similar observations are made elsewhere, with decreasing rates of male and female homicides widely attributed to the availability of services and emergency shelters for women. Research findings also document that regardless of the sex of the victim, the majority of domestic homicides are precipitated by men's violence and abuse against women, and that women are at disproportionate risk following separation (Daly & Wilson, 1988, DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2009; Wilson & Daly, 1993, Wilson, Daly & Daniele, 1995).

Ontario Domestic Violence Death Review Committee (DVDRC) publications further reveal how simple body counts are more complicated than they appear on the surface. The 2005 DVDRC found that 93% of homicide victims in their sample were women and 7% were men, and 94% of the perpetrators were men and 6% were women (p. 29). The 2006 DVDRC summarized data for domestic homicides from 2002 through 2005. These numbers are presented in Table 5.

Table 5- Sex of Victims and Perpetrators 2002-2005

Sex	Victim %	Perpetrator %
Female	95	5
Male	5	95
Total	100	100

Table excerpted from DVDRC (2006, p.5).

This breakdown of homicides reflects familiar common-sense understandings of battering as overwhelmingly perpetrated by men against women. The 95% male-perpetrated distribution of violence is often referred to by advocates, but even these figures alone do not fully reveal the dynamics of violence. The DVDRC breaks down the death statistics further to increase the descriptive and explanatory power of the numbers. They are described for each year from 2002-2005 in Table 6.

Table 6 - Domestic Violence Homicides in Ontario 2002-2005

Year	Incidents	Deaths	Women	Children	Men
2005	31	38	29	1	11 (11 perpetrator deaths)
2004	29	38	24	1	13 (11 perpetrator deaths)
2003	25	29	23	1	9 (8 perpetrator deaths)
2002	28	43	23	6	15 (11 perpetrator deaths)
Total:	113	148	99	9	48 (41 perpetrator deaths)

Table data extracted from the DVDRC (2006, p.4).

The disproportionate rate of men who commit homicide/suicide is reflected in data uncovered by Statistics Canada. For example, Pottie Bunge (2002) found that 564 men and 15 women suicided following perpetration of a domestic homicide between 1975 and 2000 (p. 1). Still, Statistics Canada does not provide national statistics on familicides, wherein a

perpetrator kills their children and partner, but there is Canadian research documenting that “familicide is virtually a male monopoly,” with men comprising 93% of perpetrators in Canada between 1975 and 1990 (Wilson et al., 1995, p. 280). Wilson et al. (1995, p. 275) argue that we should “identify conceptually coherent categories of cases in order to understand the causal dynamics and risks associated with different kinds of lethal conflict situations” to best understand and prevent homicide. The statistics presented above demonstrate how even simple counts of deaths in domestic homicide cases are misleading when taken out of context. Compared to homicide, other forms of violence are much more open to debate and interpretation. Accordingly, the amount of contextual information needed is multiplied exponentially for sublethal forms of violence and abuse.

## APPENDIX A

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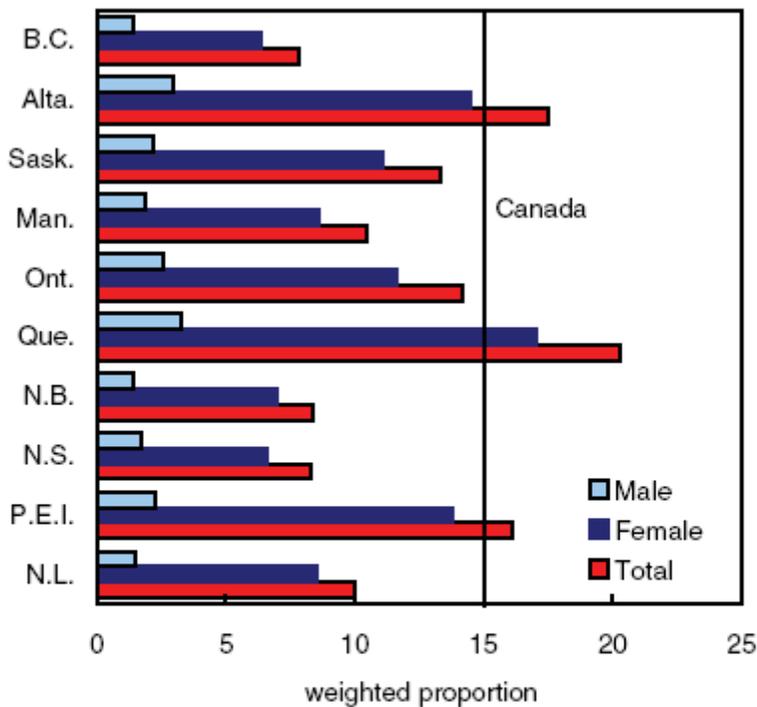
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APPENDIX B

FIGURES ILLUSTRATING SEX DIFFERENCES

**Chart 1.1**  
**Quebec, Alberta and Prince Edward Island report**  
**highest proportion of spousal violence, 2006**



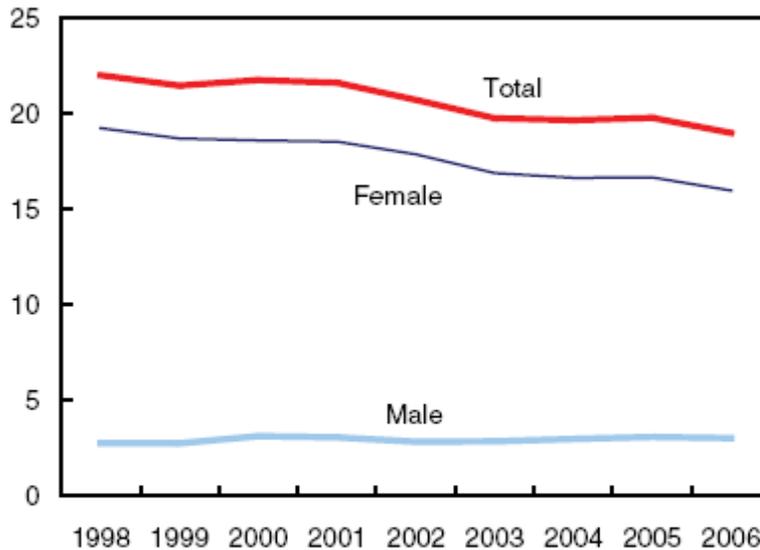
**Notes:** Data are not nationally representative. Counts are based on data from 149 police services representing approximately 90% of the population of Canada in 2006. To ensure that data are comparable across the provinces and territories, proportions have been adjusted for incidents where the relationship between the victim and the accused was unknown. Hamilton Police Service is excluded from the analysis due to data quality of the relationship variable. Excludes incidents where the sex and/or age of the victim was unknown. Includes victims aged 15 to 98.

**Source:** Statistics Canada, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, Incident-based Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR2) Survey.

Image reproduced from Bressan (2008, p. 11).

**Chart 1.3**  
**Steady decline in police-reported spousal violence,**  
**1998 to 2006**

weighted proportion



**Notes:** Excludes incidents where the sex and/or age of the victim was unknown. Includes victims aged 15 to 89. Weighted proportions are calculated on the basis of total violent incidents reported to police. Proportions have been adjusted for incidents where the relationship between the victim and the accused was unknown. Data are not nationally representative. Based on data from 63 police services across Canada, representing 53% of the national volume of crime in 2006.

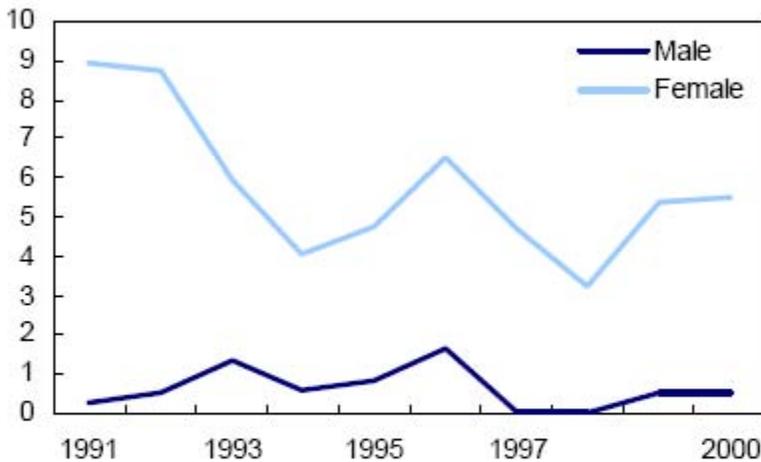
**Source:** Statistics Canada, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, Incident-based Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR2) Trend Database.

Image reproduced from Bressan (2008, p. 15).

Figure 2

**Rates of other intimate partner<sup>1,2</sup> homicides, 1991-2000**

Rate per million single population 15 years and over



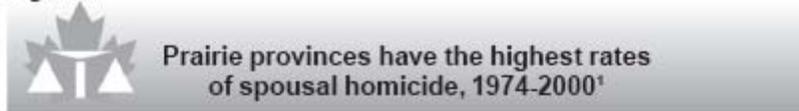
<sup>1</sup> Other intimate partners include boyfriends, girlfriends, extra-marital lovers and estranged lovers. Eleven same-sex partners were excluded from this analysis because Census data on same-sex couples is unavailable and therefore rates cannot be calculated. Homicide numbers for 1999 are revised.

<sup>2</sup> Rates are based on the number of single people aged 15 and over in the population so may underestimate the true rate as a proportion of single people are without intimate partners and some have multiple partners.  
Rates are based on population estimates, Demography Division, July 1, 2001.

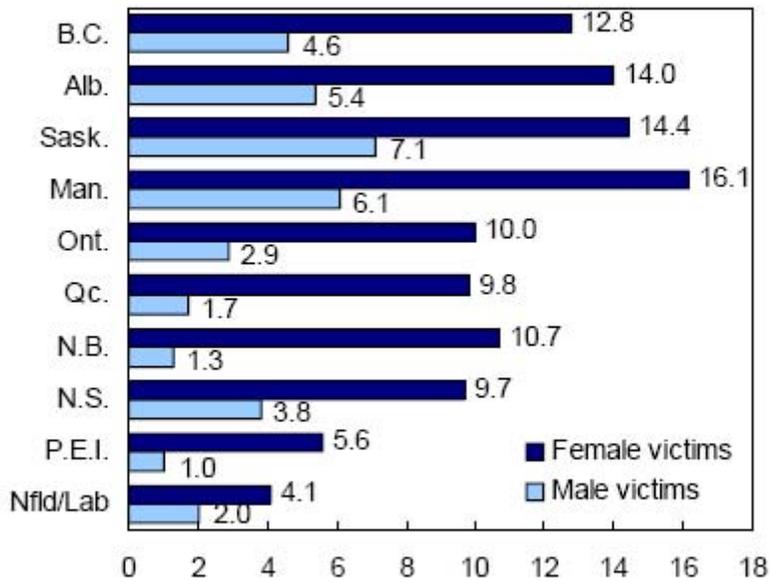
**Source:** Statistics Canada, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, Homicide Survey.

Image reproduced from Pottie Bunge (2000, p. 4).

Figure 4



Average rate per million couples



<sup>1</sup> Rate per 1,000,000 legally married, separated, divorced and common-law males and females.

Rates are based on population estimates, Demography Division, July 1, 2001.

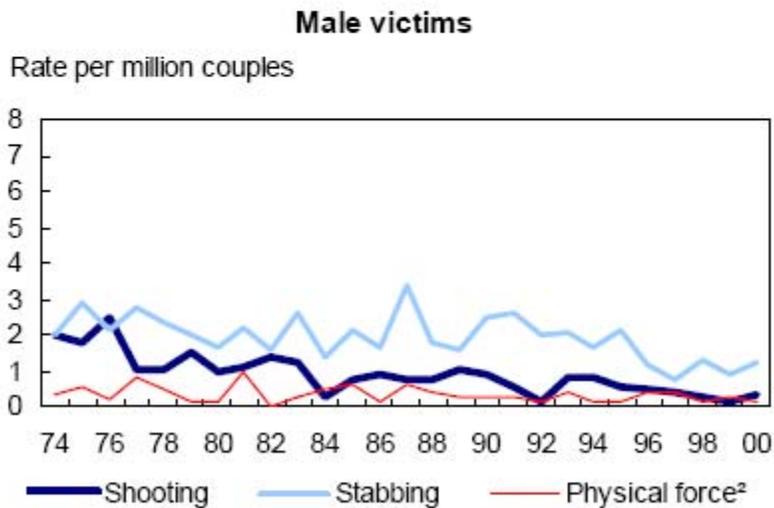
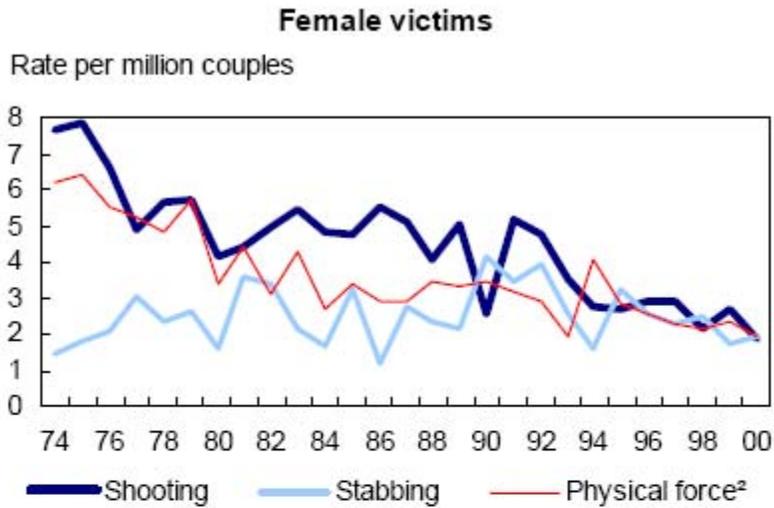
Homicide numbers for 1999 are revised.

Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, Homicide Survey.

Image reproduced from Pottie Bunge (2000, p. 5).

Figure 5

Use of firearms in spousal homicide decreasing, 1974-2000<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup> Rate per 1,000,000 legally married, separated, divorced and common-law males and females. Rates are based on population estimates, Demography Division, July 1, 2001.  
Homicide numbers for 1999 are revised.

<sup>2</sup> Physical force includes beating, strangulation, suffocation and compressing.

Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, Homicide Survey.

Image reproduced from Pottie Bunge (2000, p. 6).

The views and/or opinions expressed herein are those of the authors  
and do not necessarily reflect those of the Province.