

Male Victims of Domestic Violence:
A Substantive and Methodological Research Review

A report to:
The Equality Committee of the Department of Education and Science

by:
Michael S. Kimmel
Professor of Sociology
SUNY at Stony Brook
Stony Brook, NY 11794 USA
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Domestic violence has emerged as one of the world's most pressing problems. The United Nations estimates that between 20% to 50% of all women worldwide have experienced physical violence at the hands of an intimate partner or family member. In the United States, more than one million cases of "intimate partner violence" are reported each year, according to the U.S. Department of Justice (Goldberg, 1999, A 16). Stark and Flitcraft (1988) argue that battering is the single most common source of serious injury to women, being responsible for more injuries than road accidents, muggings and rape combined. In 1989, the U.S. Surgeon General also noted that 4,000 women are beaten to death by their partners every year. One of the major platforms for action adopted at the World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 was "the prevention and elimination of violence against women and girls."

Efforts to prevent domestic violence and to facilitate its successful prosecution have followed research and advocacy on behalf of its victims. New laws, police procedures, medical and forensic efforts have encouraged prosecution, while refuges for battered women, education and therapy groups for men who are violent towards their partners have sought to transform the conditions of domestic violence.

In recent years, a serious debate has erupted among activists, partisan organizations and individuals about the nature and direction of domestic violence. Decades after first bringing the problem to public awareness, feminist activists now confront a growing chorus of researchers and political activists who claim that women and men are victimized by domestic violence in roughly equal numbers.

Despite perhaps several thousand studies that report the preponderance of domestic violence to be perpetuated by males against females, there are also nearly 100 empirical

studies or reports that suggest that rates of domestic violence are equivalent (see, for example, Archer, 2000, and Fiebert, 1997.) In the United States, numerous studies have found that women and men are equally likely to report having hit their partner during the preceding 12 months. In Great Britain, also, 4.2% of women and men said that had been physically assaulted by a partner during the previous 12 months (Tendler, 1999).

Thus, activists for “men’s rights” have suggested that policy-oriented efforts for women have been misplaced, because they focus entirely on women as the victims of domestic violence. Instead of the picture painted by feminist researchers and activists, these activists argue that, as one writer put it, “men are the victims of domestic violence at least as often as women” (Brott, 1994).

Domestic violence, they argue, exhibits gender symmetry – an equal number of women and men are its victims. While such activists draw our attention to the often-ignored problem of men as victims of domestic violence, their efforts are also often motivated by a desire to undermine or dismantle those laudable initiatives to administer to women victims. In their view, compassion is a zero-sum game, and when we show any compassion for women who are the victims of domestic violence, we will never address the male victims.

These purported discrepancies have led to significant confusion among policymakers and the general public. Is domestic violence a “women’s” issue, or do equivalent rates indicate that the “problem” of domestic violence is a problem shared by women and men equally, or even not a problem at all?

This essay will examine the claims of gender symmetry in domestic violence. I will examine all existing sources of data on domestic violence, and suggest why the rates of domestic violence appear so varied. I will offer some ways to understand and reconcile these discordant data, so that we may acknowledge the male victims of domestic violence within the larger frameworks of male-female relationships that we observe in modern society.

Since most of the empirical evidence about domestic violence comes from United States-based studies, I will refer to them significantly throughout this paper. I will also offer some comparative data, both from other Anglophone countries as well as other nations, and refer specifically to some Irish data as well. I will conclude with a proposal for how concerned citizens might think about domestic violence.

The Idea of Gender Symmetry

Reports of gender symmetry have come to dominate the public and media discussions of domestic violence. Since these reports run counter to existing stereotypes of male-female relationships, they often have the headline-grabbing value of a “man bites dog” story.

Even some police departments are surprised by the recent percentages of women who are charged with assault of their partners. In Concord, New Hampshire 35% of domestic assault arrests are of women, an increase from 23% in 1993. In Vermont, 23% of domestic assault arrests in 1999 were of women, compared with 16% in 1997. And in Boulder, Colorado, 25% of those charged in domestic assaults were women (Goldberg, 1999, p. A16).

A 1997 review of the literature by psychologist Martin Fiebert found 79 empirical studies and 16 reviews of literature that demonstrated gender symmetry among couples. In a meta-analytic review of this literature, Archer (2000) looked at 82 studies that found gender symmetry.

These empirical studies raise troubling questions about what we “know” to be true of domestic violence – that it is something that men overwhelmingly “do” to women and not the other way around; that domestic violence is among the leading causes of serious injury to women every year; and, that worldwide, men’s violence against women is one of the world’s most widespread public health issues.

The questions they raise are indeed troubling -- but the questions they, themselves, ask are far from clear. For example, does gender symmetry mean that women hit women as often as men hit women? Or does it mean that an equal number of men and women hit each other? Or does it refer to men’s and women’s motivations for such violence, or does it mean that the consequences of it are symmetrical? These questions are often lumped together in reviews of literature and “meta-analyses” (which review existing data sets).

The two large-scale reviews of literature that demonstrate gender symmetry are useful indicators of the types of evidence offered and the arguments made by their proponents. Of the 79 empirical articles that Fiebert reviews, 55 used the same empirical measure of “family conflict,” the Conflict Tactics Scale as the sole measure of domestic violence. This same scale was also used in 76 out of the 82 studies that Archer (2000) examined. In addition, 28 of those studies noted by Fiebert discussed samples composed entirely of young people – college students, high school students, dating couples under 30) – and not married couples. (These two groups overlap somewhat, as nearly half of the studies of young, dating couples (13) also used the CTS.)

As a result, I will discuss the CTS at some length below, and also examine some of the reasons that studies of college-age and dating couples yield different rates of violence and aggression than studies of somewhat older married couples.

Of the remaining 9 studies in Fiebert’s sample that used neither the CTS nor sampled only young, dating, unmarried couples, 2 were based on people’s perceptions of violence, but offered no data about violence itself, while another was based on reports of witnessing violence that contained no useful data (Feather, 1996; Fiebert, 1996, Mwamwenda, 1997). Another was a study of spousal homicide that did not include homicides by ex-spouses (to which we shall also give some attention). One was a study

of young people that had no comparisons by gender (Mihalic and Elliot, 1997). And one was based on violence in American comic strips in 1950 (Saenger, 1963).

Of the three remaining studies, two were based on clinical samples undertaken by colleagues of this author at State University of New York, Stony Brook (Tyree and Malone, 1991, and O'Leary, et al., 1989). While these two studies do suggest that couples that seek clinical therapeutic help have high rates of mutual aggression, O'Leary has insisted that the age of the individuals dramatically changes the data (O'Leary, 1999, 2000), and that clinical samples cannot necessarily be generalized to a national population. Even so, as Fiebert notes, the study by Tyree and Malone (1991) found that women's violence was a result of a "desire to improve contact with partners," by which they meant that the women tended to slap or push their partner in order to get him to pay attention, but not to hurt him.

Gonzalez's unpublished Masters thesis (1997), written apparently under Fiebert's supervision, is the sole survey that purports to find gender symmetry. While it may be of interest that most of the women said their violence was a "spontaneous reaction to frustration," Gonzalez did not survey males nor administer to a sample of males the same questionnaire. Unfortunately, one can make no inferences whatever about gender symmetry when one surveys only one gender.

Fiebert's scholarly annotated bibliography thus turns out to be far more of an ideological polemic than a serious scholarly undertaking. But since it has become a touchstone for those who argue for gender symmetry, it is important to consider the studies on which it is based. Despite the angry polemics, there are serious and credible social researchers who have used specific measures and found gender symmetry. Below, I examine (1) the Conflict Tactics Scale, and especially what it measures and what it does not measure; and, (2) the effects of age and marital status on domestic violence.

Those who insist on gender symmetry must also account for two statistical anomalies. First, there is the dramatic disproportion of women in shelters and hospital emergency care facilities. Why is it that when we begin at the end of the domestic violence experience – when we examine the serious injuries that often are its consequence -- the rates are so dramatically asymmetrical? Second, claims of gender symmetry in marital violence must be squared with the empirical certainty that in every single other arena of social life, men are far more disproportionately likely to use violence than women. Why are women so much more violent in the home that their rates approach, or even exceed, those of men, while in every other non-domestic arena men's rates of violence are about nine times those of women (on rates of violence generally, see Kimmel, 2000)?

How Do We Know What We Know: Types of Data

Our understanding of domestic violence has typically relied on two types of information (see, for example, Nazroo, 1995). These are "crime victimization studies," which rely

on large-scale aggregate data on crime victimization and “family conflict studies” which measure the prevalence of aggression between married or cohabiting couples. These two sources of data find very different rates of domestic violence – in part because they are measuring two different things.

Crime Victimization Studies. Data about crime victimization are gathered from a variety of sources. Some are obtained from household surveys, such as the National Violence Against Women in America Survey (NVAW), sponsored by the National Institute of Justice and the Centers for Disease Control (see Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1998). This nationally-representative sample surveyed 8,000 women and 8,000 men representing 16,000 households in the United States. Other crime studies are compiled from police statistics, the National Crime Survey, and the National Crime Victimization Study (NCVS) in which 60,000 households are surveyed annually. Police data typically relies on calls to domestic violence hot lines or calls to police departments.

Crime victimization studies have large sample sizes, in part because they are funded by national, state, and local government agencies. Crime victimization studies include a wide range of assaults, including sexual assault in their samples. And they ask not only about current partner (spouse or cohabiting partner) but also about ex-spouse. But they ask only about those events that the person experiences - or even reports to municipal authorities - as a crime, and therefore miss those events that are neither perceived as nor reported as crimes.

They also find significantly lower rates of domestic violence than family conflict studies -- ranging from significantly less than 1% to about 1.1% of all couples. Analysis of the period 1973-1975 found an extremely low rate of violence, about 2.2 per 1,000 couples or 0.2%. (This was explained by the fact that the couples were interviewed together, and victims may have been reluctant to respond out of fear of further violence.)

Some of the reasons that they find lower rates of violence are that crime victimization studies include all individuals in a household over age 12, even though rates of domestic assault are far lower for women over age 65 and between 12-18. All family members were interviewed, which also may prevent some respondents from disclosing incidents of violence out of fear of retaliation.

These studies uniformly find dramatic gender asymmetry in rates of domestic violence. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, of the one million cases of “intimate partner violence” reported each year, female victims outnumber male victims by more than five to one. In their analysis of police data, Dobash and Dobash (1979) for example, found that only 1% of all domestic violence cases in two cities in Scotland were assaults by wives. The National Crime Victimization Survey (1994) found females reported ten times as many incidents of violence as men did – 3.9 incidents per 1,000 population for male perpetrators, and 0.3 per 1,000 women (see also Dawson and Logan, 1994). The NVAW found that men physically assaulted their partners at three times the rate in which women assaulted their spouses.

Crime victimization studies report high rates of injury to women from domestic assault, from 76% (NVAW), 75% (NCS) and 52% (NCVS).

Crime victimization studies further find that domestic violence increases in severity over time, so that earlier “moderate” violence is likely to be followed by more severe violence later (Johnson and Ferraro, 2000). This emerges also in discussions of spousal homicide, where significant numbers of people murdered by their spouses or ex-spouses were also earlier victims of violence.

In sum, crime victimization studies typically find that domestic violence is rare, serious, escalates over time, and is perpetrated by men.

Family Conflict Studies. By contrast, Family Conflict Studies are based on smaller-scale nationally representative household surveys such as The National Family Violence Survey (Straus and Gelles, 1990) or the National Survey of Families and Households, and the British and Canadian national surveys. These surveys interview respondents once, and ask only one partner of a cohabiting couple (over 18) about their experiences with various methods of expressing conflict in the family. Other survey evidence comes from smaller scale surveys of college students or dating couples, and some draw from clinical samples of couples seeking marital therapy. Still other data are drawn from convenience samples of people who responded to advertisements for subjects placed in newspapers and magazines. According to Fiebert, the total number of respondents for all of the gender symmetry studies is slightly more than 66,000 – that is, slightly more than the single annual number of one of the Crime Victimization studies in any one year.

These surveys both expand and contract the types of questions asked to the respondents. On the one hand, they ask about all the possible experiences of physical violence, including those that are not especially serious or severe, and that do not result in injury -- that is, those that might not be reported, or even thought to be a crime. On the other hand, they ask questions only about cohabiting couples (and therefore exclude assaults by ex-spouses or partners) and exclude sexual assault, embedding domestic violence within a context of “family conflict.” So, for example, the Conflict Tactics asks respondents about what happens “when they disagree, get annoyed with the other person, or just have spats or fights because they’re in a bad mood or tired or for some other reason” (Straus, 1997, p. 217)

Family Conflict Studies tend to find much higher general rates of domestic violence than Crime Victimization Studies – typically about 16% of all couples report some form of domestic violence (Straus, 1990). One summary of 21 of the approximately 120 studies that have explored Family Conflict, found that about one-third of men and two-fifths of women indicated using violence in their marriages (Sugarman and Hotaling, 1989).

As surprising as it may be to see such high levels of violence, the most surprising finding

From Family Conflict Studies has been the gender symmetry in the use of violence to resolve family conflicts, that, as Fiebert writes, “women are as physically aggressive, or more aggressive, than men in their relationships” (Fiebert, 1997, p. 273).

These studies also find much lower rates of injury from domestic violence, typically about 3% (Stets and Straus, 1990). When “minor” forms of injury (such as slapping, pushing, and grabbing) are excluded from the data, the yearly incidence falls significantly, from 16% noted above to around 6% of all couples (Straus and Gelles, 1986).

These studies also find that violence is unlikely to escalate over time (see Johnson and Ferraro, 2000).

In sum, then, Family Conflict Studies tend to find high rates of domestic violence, stable levels of severity, low rates of injury and find it perpetrated equally by women and men.

How are such different conclusions to be reconciled?

A first step is to make the sources of data similar and make sure they are asking similar questions and comparing the same sorts of events. Crime Victimization Studies rely on two types of data – surveys of national probability samples that are representative of the population at large and “clinical” samples – calls to police and shelters and visits to emergency rooms. Family Conflict Studies are based on three sources of data: nationally representative probability samples, clinical samples and convenience samples based on responses to advertisements.

Nationally representative probability samples are the only sources of data that are consistently reliable and generalizable. While clinical samples may have important therapeutic utility, especially in treatment modalities, they are relatively easy to dismiss as adequate empirical surveys, since they do not offer control groups from the non-clinical population, and therefore offer no grounds whatever for generalizability. Therefore, I shall omit from further discussion both types of clinical data – police, shelter and emergency room data and data drawn from marital therapy cases.

Recruitment via ads in newspapers and magazines offer related problems of the representativeness of the sample and therefore undermine efforts at generalizability. Often people who respond to such ads respond because they have a “stake” in the issue, and feel that they want to contribute to it somehow. The representativeness of such people to the general population is unclear at best. (In the best of these studies, O’Leary and his colleagues have found that about 31% of the men and 44% of the women indicated that they had engaged in some aggression to their partners in the year before they were married. A year after the marriage, rates had dropped for both groups and 27% of the men and 36% of the women indicated they had aggressed, and 30 months into the marriage the rates for the previous year were 25% of the men and 32% of the women [O’Leary, 1989, p. 264].)

Virtually all the “family conflict” surveys rely on the “Conflict Tactics Scales” (CTS and CTS2), a survey measure developed by New Hampshire sociologist Murray Straus and his collaborators. As a result I will devote considerable attention to the CTS and its method.

The Conflict Tactics Scale

Several critiques of the CTS have been offered by scholars and advocates for women. While some of these criticisms are, in fact, well answered by those who use and defend the CTS, other criticisms are telling and disturbing. Equally unsettling are the ways these findings conflate different variables (such as age, marital or cohabiting status) and the variables that are deliberately excluded from analysis (sexual assault and assaults by ex-spouses). We will deal with each of these in turn.

Let's begin where the CTS begins. Here is the opening paragraph to the survey as administered (Straus, 1990):

No matter how well a couple gets along, there are times when they disagree, get annoyed with the other person, or just have spats or fights because they're in a bad mood or tired or for some other reason. They also use many different ways of trying to settle their differences. I'm going to read some things that you and your (spouse/partner) might do when you have an argument. I would like you to tell me how many times...in the past 12 months you ... (Straus, 1990).

Such a framing assumes that domestic violence is the result of an argument, that it has more to do with being tired or in a bad mood than it does with an effort to control another person. This may, of course, be true of a significant amount of domestic violence, but it is certainly not true of all.

As we can see, the CTS asks about frequency, although only for one year. Asking how often in the past year either spouse hit the other may capture some version of reality, but does not capture an ongoing systematic pattern of abuse and violence over many years. This is akin to the difference between watching a single frame of a movie and the movie itself.

Context. The CTS simply counts acts of violence, but takes no account of the circumstances under which these acts occur. Who initiates the violence, the relative size and strength of the people involved, the nature of the relationship all will surely shape the experience of the violence, but not the scores on the CTS. Thus, if she pushes him back after being severely beaten, it would be scored one "conflict tactic" for each. And if she punches him to get him to stop beating their children, or pushes him away after he has sexually assaulted her, it would count as one for her, none for him.

In response to these criticisms, Straus and his colleagues acknowledge that the context is important, but believe that it is preferable to explore the context separately from the incidence. This response is unpersuasive, more like observing that death rates have soared for males between 19 and 30 without explaining that a country has declared war. This we will explore some of these "contextual" issues.

Initiation. Some critics have argued that simply asking how many times a person or his/her spouse used a series of conflict tactics is inadequate to measure the initiation of the violence. Straus (1993) argues that, using the CTS, initiation is about even, and that self-defense is not the motivation for most women, who initiated in 53% of the cases. In 42% they reported that their husbands initiated the aggression, and about 3% said they could not tell who initiated it. Data from other studies, however, indicated that women were far more likely to use violence defensively, fighting back against the aggression of their partner (DeKeseredy, et al., 1997). With such discordant findings, the CTS's value is limited unless there are a variety of measures incorporated to adequately ascertain the motivation for violence.

Intention and Motivation. Asking people how often they used various conflict tactics during an argument assumes that people use violence expressively, that is in the heat of anger, as a way to settle an argument, to get one's point across, to get the spouse or partner to listen or pay attention. It misses the way violence might be used instrumentally – to control or subdue, to reproduce subordination. Such an absence would be analogous to discussing rape, and only focusing on those date and acquaintance rapes in which there had been some sexual foreplay and the boundaries were less than fully clear, while ignoring, for example rapes that ended in murders, rape as a systematic policy of militarily subduing a population, rape in prison, and rape of strangers that has nothing to do with sexual ardor. In short, motivation for violence matters.

Does Location Matter?: The Public Private Split. In general, men are more aggressive than women. In fact, violence is the only variable for which there are intractable and overwhelmingly skewed results showing gender differences. While gender differences on a host of other variables – such as spatial orientation and visual perception, academic achievement and ability -- have been demonstrated, these differences are typically quite small. Rates of violence based on gender, however, are large and consistent. In their path-breaking work, The Psychology of Sex Differences (1974), Maccoby and Jacklin found that violence exhibits the greatest gender variation; twenty years later, an analysis by Baron and Richardson (1994) found the same thing. So we would have to ask why would women hit men inside the house in roughly equal numbers but almost never commit violence towards men – or women – outside the home?

Studies that propose gender symmetry must explain this apparent paradox. Some argue, for example, that women assume that their violence towards their male partners is harmless (see Fiebert and Gonzalez, 1997). Straus believes that slapping a man might actually be considered appropriately feminine behavior (Straus, 1999). It is likely that each of these has some validity, but neither addresses the motivation of the women's violence nor the context in which it occurs.

Actually, most empirical research on female aggression points in a very different direction. For example, Bjorkqvist and Niemela (1992) found that females are as aggressive as males – but only when they are not in any danger of being recognized, i.e. when there is no danger of retaliation. When parties know each other, women's violence

tends to be defensive and men take the initiative (Adams, 1992). Obviously, domestic violence cannot fit the pattern of women retaining their anonymity.

Two final criticisms of the CTS – one methodological and one substantive – deserve somewhat fuller elaboration.

The Methodological Problem of Memory: Retrospective Analysis and Reporting Bias. Finally, there is a methodological problem that will skew the substantive results. The CTS relies on retrospection, asking people to accurately remember what happened during the past year. (It shares this method with Crime Victimization Studies, and these biases may well extend to those studies as well.) Retrospection may not be completely reliable because memory often serves our current interests, but is unlikely to provide an accurate rendition of what actually happened. There is some evidence that the gender symmetry of domestic violence breaks down when retrospective studies are used alone. Why?

One argument is that men would be likely to under-estimate how often they were victimized because being hit by a woman is so emasculating that they would be too ashamed to admit it, while women would tend to over-estimate how often they were hit because it might serve their interests to make false allegations of domestic assault in divorce or custody proceedings. Both of these assumptions turn out to be empirically groundless; in fact, the evidence points decidedly in the other direction.

Both women and men see their use of violence as gender non-conforming, but the consequences of this non-conformity might lead women and men to estimate their use of violence and their victimization quite differently. Women are socialized not to use violence, and, as a result, they would tend to remember every transgression. As Dobash et al. (1998, p. 405) write, “women may be more likely to remember their own aggression because it is deemed less appropriate and less acceptable for women than for men and thus takes on the more memorable quality of a forbidden act or one that is out of character” – and thus one which one is more likely to remember. Men however, might find it emasculating to reveal that their assumed control over “their women” is so tenuous that they are forced to use violence to “keep her in line.” They may find it difficult to admit that they cannot “handle their wives.” Thus men might under-estimate their violence, and women might tend to over-estimate theirs.

What’s more, in addition to over-estimating their own violence, women may also tend to under-estimate their partner’s violence given the norms of domestic life, which frequently find women discounting, downplaying or normalizing their partner’s violent behavior, or even excusing it since they “deserved” it. (This is the foundation for what researchers have labeled the “battered woman’s syndrome,” a pattern of normalizing and excusing men’s violence.)

By the same token, in addition to under-estimating their own violence, men may over-estimate their partner’s violence, for the same norms of masculinity. American men, at least, believe violence is legitimate only if used as retaliation for violence already committed (see, for example, Mead, 1950; Kimmel 1996). The expression “having a

chip on one's shoulder" actually has its literal origin among young southern white boys after the Civil War, placing a piece of wood on their shoulder and daring someone to knock it off, so that they might legitimately fight and prove their manhood. Initiating violence is never legitimate, but retaliating with violence is. Imagine, for example, asking Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland who have been arrested for acts of violence if they initiated the violent behavior or if they were responding to an unjury already done to them. Thus men will tend to over-estimate their victimization, and women will tend to under-estimate theirs.

In response to the notion that men would be too ashamed or humiliated to call the police or go to the hospital if they were beaten by their wives, available empirical evidence suggests a very different picture: that men are actually more likely to call the police, more likely to press charges, and less likely to drop them (Schwartz, 1987; Rouse et al., 1988; Kincaid, 1982; Ferrante et al, 1996). This makes sense in the terms outlined above, as women would be more likely to forgive being hit, normalize it with statements about how he really does love her. Another study found that men under-report the violence they perpetrate against women by 50% (Edelson and Brygger, 1986). Dobash and his colleagues (1998, p. 408) found a useful measure of the gender asymmetry in reporting – the women's narrative descriptions of the events of their experiences are far longer and more richly detailed, entering the narrative at a much earlier point in the unfolding drama, and extending the narrative to include injuries and other consequences.

If men under-estimate their own violence and over-estimate their victimization, while women over-estimate their own violence and under-estimate their victimization, this would have enormous consequences in a survey that asks only one partner to recall accurately how much they and their spouse used various "conflict-resolution" techniques.

The Causes and Consequences of Violence: Severity and Injury. A final substantive critique of the CTS is that it does not measure the consequences of physical assault (such as physical or emotional injury) or the causes of the assault (such as the desire to dominate). Straus responds to his critics by remarking that "this is akin to thinking that a spelling test is inadequate because it does not measure why a child spells badly, or does not measure possible consequences of poor spelling, such as low self-esteem or low evaluations by employers" (1997, p. 218).

Such an analogy is utterly inadequate. It is more akin to a teacher who doesn't look at how far off the spelling mistakes are or whether there is a pattern in the mistakes that might point to a physiological problem like dyslexia or some other learning disability, as compared to academic laziness, and thus leaving the learning problems untouched and misdirecting funds away from towards punitive after-school programs for lazy students. And even that analogy is imperfect because, unlike spelling, domestic violence is not about what happens to the perpetrator (the poor speller) but to someone else. Can one imagine any other issue in which causes and consequences are thought to be irrelevant?

The consequences of violence raise perhaps the most telling criticism of the CTS – a criticism, not incidentally, that Straus and his more thoughtful collaborators share, as I will discuss below.

The CTS lumps together many different forms of violence, so that a single slap may be equated with a more intensive assault. In the National Violence Against Women Survey, for example, lifetime percentages of persons physically assaulted by an intimate partner found dramatic differences in some types of assault, but not others. For example, just under 1% of men and women (.9% of women and .8% of men) said their attacker used a knife in the attack, but 3.5% of women and only .4% of men said their partner threatened to use a gun, and .7% of women and .1% of men said their spouse actually did use a gun. (It is interesting to note that these differences inside the home are actually slightly smaller than the differences outside the home, where men are overwhelmingly more likely to use weapons in an attack.)

Even more telling were the gender disparities in serious physical injuries without weapons. For example, in a British study that found equal rates of reporting, there were no injuries at all reported in the 59% of incidents that involved pushing, shoving and grabbing (these are the behaviors more typically reported by women than by men). In Crime Victimization Studies, half the number of men than women (4.4% of men and 8.1% of women) said their partner threw something at them, and three times as many women (18.1% of women and 5.4% of men) said their partner pushed or grabbed or shoved them, or that their partner slapped or hit them (16.0% of women and 5.5% of men). But over ten times as many women (8.5% of women and .6% of men) reported that their partner “beat them up” (Tjaden and Thonnes, 1998, p.7).

The consequences of violence range from minor to fatal, and these are significant in understanding domestic violence in general and its gendered patterns. Far more men than women murder their spouses (and, of course, “couples” in which one spouse murdered the other could not participate in the CTS studies since both partners must be cohabiting at the time of the study). And rates of murders of ex-spouses are even more gender asymmetrical. According to the FBI, female victims represent about 70% of all intimate murder victims. About one-third of all female murder victims were killed by an intimate compared with 4% of male murder victims (see, for example, Kellerman and Mercy, 1992; Bachman and Saltzman, 1995). (What this suggests, of course, is that both women and men are more likely to be murdered by a man; efforts to end all types of violence ought to properly focus on the association of masculinity and violence, the legitimacy of violence to men, and men’s sense of entitlement to use violence.) In the United States, the number of men murdered by intimates has dropped by 69% since 1976. The number of women killed by intimates was relatively stable until 1993, when it too began to drop, but only by about 15% (US Department of Justice; <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/homicide/intimates.htm>)

Gender symmetry tends to be clustered entirely at the lower end of violence (Dobash, et al., 1998, p. 382). According to some data, women are six times more likely to require medical care for injuries sustained by family violence (Kaufman Kantor and Straus,

1987; Stets and Straus, 1990). Straus also reports that in family conflict studies the injury rate for assaults by men is about seven times greater than the injury rate for assaults by women (Stets and Straus, 1990).

This dramatic difference in rates of injury, found in both types of studies, leads Straus, the creator of the CTS and the single most important researcher to find gender symmetry in family conflict to write that:

although women may assault their partners at approximately the same rate as men, because of the greater physical, financial, and emotional injury suffered by women, they are the predominant victims. Consequently, the first priority in services for victims and in prevention and control must continue to be directed toward assaults by husbands” (Straus, 1997).

Straus is unequivocal that even if “women may assault their partners at approximately the same rate as men assault theirs, because of the greater physical, financial, and emotional injury suffered, women are the predominant victims” (1997, p. 219). Straus also understands that “women, on average, suffer much more frequent and more severe injury (physical, economic, and psychological) than men (Straus, 2000, see also Stets and Straus, 1990; Straus, Gelles and Steinmetz, 1980).

These different rates of injury are so pronounced that when injury data has been obtained in studies using the CTS, the rate of violence drops to that predicted by the crime victimization studies, and the gender asymmetry of such studies is also revealed (see Straus, 1997). This leads another researcher to conclude that both husbands and wives may be said to be “aggressive” but many more husbands are “violent.” (Frude, 1994, p. 153).

Age and Aggression

The CTS measures family conflict in intact partnerships, either cohabiting or married couples. However, as we’ve seen, more than one-third of the studies noted by Fiebert that found gender symmetry were surveys of college age, dating couples who were not cohabiting. About one-half of Archer’s samples (2000) in his meta-analytic review involved high school or college students. Therefore, it is important to examine the way age exerts an effect on domestic violence.

According to all available research, age - especially being under 30 - is a strong predictor of partner violence (see Suitor, Pillemer and Straus, 1990). O’Leary and his associates have consistently found that age is a significant variable in the distribution of partner violence. Rates of violence rise significantly between age 10 (less than 2% violent) and to age 25, where levels peak at 35% of all couples. But after 25, rates begin to drop and keep dropping to return to about 5% by age 75. This suggests that younger couples are most likely to have the highest rates of violence. (O’Leary, 1999). The National Survey of Adolescents in the United States found that of 22.3 million adolescents (age 12-17),

1.8 million had been the victim of a serious sexual assault, and 3.9 million had been the victim of a serious physical assault. Females were four times more likely to have been sexually assaulted (13% to 3.4%), and young males were significantly more likely to have been physically assaulted (21.3% to 13.4%). (Kilpatrick and Saunders, 1997, 2000.)

O’Leary believes that this is because violence means very different things to younger dating couples than to married couples at midlife, in which violence is usually associated with significant marital discord (O’Leary, 1999, 2000). It certainly means different things to young boys and girls. A study of Finnish teenagers, for example, found that gender differences in rates of violence dropped markedly between the 1980s and the 1990s, and young girls saw aggression as “something that makes the girl feel powerful, strong and make her popular” (Viemero, 1992, p. 105). However, there is no evidence that such changes among teenage girls translate into changes among adult women. Therefore, O’Leary cautions that the two populations – young, unmarried dating couples and older married couples at midlife – are so dissimilar that results from one population cannot be generalized to the other.

Younger people also report using only a few of the various forms of conflict – pushing and slapping. These are not typically associated with injury or with fear of the partner (O’Leary, 2000). Stets’s work on the centrality of control in dating violence (Stets and Pirog-Good, 1990) also helps explain the relationship of age and gender on non-spousal violence. It is possible that men’s rates of violence drop after marriage because they establish their control over the relationship (financial, physical, emotional) and that therefore overt acts of violence are less necessary as long as the threat of violence is present.

What the CTS Leaves Out

It is not only important to understand what the CTS measures, but make explicit what it does not measure. First, the CTS does not include sexual assault in its definition of family conflict. This is crucial, because a significant number of spousal assaults were sexual assaults. The National Crime Victimization Survey found that 19% of all spousal assaults were rapes (1994). In Ireland in 2000, about one-fourth of all rapes reported to the Dublin Rape Crisis Centre were committed by boyfriends, cohabiting male partners or husbands (DRCC). Yet Straus and Gelles (1990) do not even include rape as a category in the index.

In addition, half of all women who report being raped are juveniles (under 18) and 16% were younger than 12. Of those under 12, 96% knew their attackers; 20% were victimized by their fathers (U.S. Department of Justice, June 1994).

Second, the CTS only includes violence by a current spouse or cohabiting partner. It does not include violence by an ex-spouse or partner. Crime victimization studies do include these. This is important because crimes by former spouses comprise a significant number of domestic assaults. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, about three-

fourths (75.9%) of all spousal assaults are actually committed by the ex-spouse, and about 93% of those assaults are committed by men. The NCVS found that rates of intimate-perpetrated violence for separated women are over 8 times higher than rates for married women (Bachman and Salzman, 1995). It may be true that these might be somewhat over-represented in crime victimization studies because people who are assaulted by a former spouse would be more likely to report that as a crime, since the former spouse clearly had no “right” to aggress against the victim, and so it would clearly be seen as a crime and more likely to be reported. But to ignore these data would so skew any study as to make it unreliable.

In an Australian study, only 1% of all violent victimization of men involved an ex-spouse or ex-partner, but it involved fully one-third of all female incidents (Ferrante, 1996, pp. 56-61). Failure to include ex-spouses may “lose” up to one-third of all cases.

Failure to include sexual assault and assaults by ex-spouses compounds the problem that the CTS does not adequately measure rates of serious injury from domestic violence. The United States Department of Justice found that 72.6% of rape victims and 66.6% of physical assault victims sustained injuries such as a scratch, bruise or welt, and that 14.1% of rape victims and 12.2% of physical assault victims sustained a broken bone or dislocated joint. Rape victims were far more likely to sustain an internal injury (5.8% to .8%), or a chipped or broken tooth (3.3% to 1.8%). On the other hand, physical assault victims were more likely to sustain a laceration or knife wound (16.9% to 6.2%) a head or spinal cord injury (10.1% to 6.6%) and burns and bullet wounds (.7% and 1.8% respectively; rape rates too low to estimate) (Tjaden and Thoennes, 1998, p.9)

Violence by ex-spouses also tends to be more serious. For example, the risk of spousal murder goes up by about 50% for women who leave abusive husbands. (This may also help explain the “rationality” in the decision by women to stay in abusive relationships.) One study of spousal homicide (Bernard et al., 1982) found that over half of all defendants were separated from their victims at the time they were accused of committing the murder. (Here in the United States, one always thinks of O.J. Simpson, who had been arrested several times for wife abuse before he apparently murdered his wife, calling himself “a battered husband” because one time she hit him back.)

In sum, the gender symmetry found by CTS-based studies do not take into account severity of injury, sexual assault, and assaults by former spouses. Some (not Straus’s) fail to adequately account for marital status and age. Including these would certainly make the gender asymmetry of domestic violence more clear.

How Can we Understand the Use of Aggression in Domestic Life?

These two different types of studies – Crime Victimization Studies and Family Conflict Studies – rely on two different theoretical perspectives and two different sources of data. They measure two different phenomena based on two different conceptualizations of

aggression in families. But they can be reconciled both conceptually and methodologically

If one is interested in the level of aggression in family conflict – i.e. the likelihood of any type of aggression occurring when a couple has an argument – then the CTS scale may be somewhat useful. I say “somewhat” because, as I argued above, the utility of the CTS is limited by the fact that it fails to take into include sexual assault and also assault by an ex-spouse. But it does enable us to see the overall amount of a particular kind of violence in families, what we might call expressive violence – the way a person might express anger, frustration, or loss of control.

If, however, one were interested in the ways in which one partner uses violence not expressively but instrumentally, to achieve some end of control, injury, or terror, then the CTS would be a poor measure. Then crime victimization surveys will be more valuable because these measure serious injury, and include sexual assault and assaults by ex-spouses in their purview. These surveys may capture those family conflicts where the level of violence escalates beyond a mere “conflict tactic” to something far more ominous and perhaps lethal.

Some domestic violence by men against women is motivated not by the desire to express anger, frustration or some other immediate emotion during a family conflict, but may be motivated by social control. Violence is “designed to control, dominate and express authority and power” writes one feminist sociologist (Hamner, 1996, p. 8). However, the use of violence may indicate not the experience of control but the experience of loss of control. “Violence is a part of a system of domination,” writes R.W. Connell, “but it is at the same time a measure of its imperfection” (1995, p. 84).

What most research on men who assault their partners or ex-partners indicates is that men use violence when they fear that their control is breaking down, that their ability to control their partner by the implicit threat of violence is compromised and the men feel compelled to use explicit violence to “restore” their control. Thus men see their violence as restorative, retributive, retaliatory. Kalmuss and Straus (1982) found that women’s economic dependency on a man increased the likelihood of physical violence used against her. Dobash and Dobash (1979) found three predictors that sparked male violence – his sexual jealousy; his perception that she failed to perform a household task such as cleaning or preparing a hot meal; her challenging his authority on financial matters – and all of these are indicators of a breakdown of his expected dominance and control.

This understanding of control-motivated, instrumental violence is particularly important in our understanding of claims of gender symmetry. For one thing, men’s control over women has clearly broken down when their spouse has left them; thus measures of physical assault that do not include assaults by ex-spouses will entirely miss these events. Second, breakdowns of men’s control over women may be revealed not by physical assault, but by the withholding of sexual intimacy. She may exert what limited power she may have by attempting to withhold sexually, by refusing his sexual advances. Thus

measures that do not include sexual assaults among acts of aggression will be equally inadequate to measure the problem.

Control-motivated instrumental violence is experienced by the men not as an expression of their power but as an instance of its collapse. The men may feel entitled to experience that control over women, but at the moments when they become violent, they do not feel that control. Masculinity, in that sense has already been compromised; violence is a method to restore one's manhood and domestic inequality at the same time (see, for example, Kimmel, 1994, 1996, 2000). It is easy to see that such control-motivated, instrumental violence is more likely to escalate over time, less likely to be mutual, and more likely to involve serious injury.

This difference between expressive and instrumental violence is not simply a difference in purpose, but also frequency, severity and initiation. It addresses whether the violence is part of a systematic pattern of control and fear, or an isolated expression of frustration or anger. These two types of violence are so different that Michael Johnson, one of the leading researchers on domestic violence in the United States, has come to call instrumental violence "patriarchal terrorism" (PT) and the types of expressive violence measured by the CTS as "common couple violence" (CCV; see Johnson, 1995).

Social control-motivated abuse can be illustrated in another form of domestic violence: stalking. Control-motivated abuse refers to intentionally inflicted physically or psychologically painful or hurtful acts (or threats) by male partners as a means of compelling or constraining the conduct, dress, or demeanor of their female partners (Ellis and Stuckless, 1996). Rates of stalking by an intimate, far more prevalent than previously thought, can best be understood as an effort to restore control or dominance after the partner has left. Stalking exhibits dramatic gender asymmetry: nearly 5% of American women and about one-half of one per cent (.6%) of men report being stalked by a current or former intimate partner at some time in their life (Tjader and Thoennes, 2000.)

Claims about the gender symmetry of "conflict-motivated" expressive violence must be complemented with claims about the dramatic gender asymmetry in "control-motivated" instrumental violence.

When these two are factored together, it is clear that women and men may express their anger or frustration during a family more equally than we earlier thought. This, however, is by no means fully symmetrical, because even the CTS leaves out two of the dominant forms of expressive "conflict-motivated" aggression – sexual assault and assault by an ex-spouse. And when "control-motivated" instrumental violence is added – the violence that more typically results in serious injury, is more systematic and independent on specific "conflict" situations, the gender asymmetry should be clear.

Some Comparative Data

The gender asymmetry of domestic violence holds steadily across cultures. According to United Nations, domestic violence against women is part of a larger constellation of domestic control, terror, and violence. In the State of the World Population Report 2000, the U.N. noted that wife abuse, rape, “honor” killings, as well as denial of access to education and work, and denial of control over their bodies and reproduction, and other forms of control “remain firmly rooted in cultures around the world.” A new and growing problem is that female fetuses are aborted in increasingly disproportionate numbers (see also, Dugger, 2001), as ultrasound and amniocentesis are increasingly available. According to the report, at least one in three women has been beaten, coerced into sex, or abused in some way.

While gender asymmetrical rates are found universally, the actual rates of men’s violence against women vary widely across cultures. The United Nation Family Planning Agency’s comparative data range from a low of 16% of women in Cambodia to a high of 67% in Papua New Guinea have been physically assaulted by a male partner. (Other rates include 29% in Canada, 22% in the United States and Switzerland, 40% in India and 20% in South Africa. See <http://www.unfpa.org/swp/2000/English/figures/figures5.html>).

In addition, since physical violence is often coupled with sexual assault and rape, these two forms of violence against women must be considered together. In Japan, for example, a study of 613 abused women found that over half (57%) had experienced both physical and sexual abuse, while only 8% had experienced physical abuse alone. A Mexican survey found similar rates: over half (52%) of physically abused women had also been sexually abused by their husbands. And a Nicaraguan study found that of 188 women who had been physically abused, only 5 were not also sexually or psychologically abused (Population Information Program, 1999, p. 5)

In the United States, though, rates of men’s violence vary greatly. In the 1995-1996 National Violence Against Women Survey, 13% of Asian and Pacific Islander women reported being physically assaulted by an intimate partner, compared with 21% of white women, 26% of African American women, 31% of American Indian and Alaska Natives and 27% for mixed race people (see also Cazenave and Straus, 1990). Other surveys have found few significant differences in the rates of violence among different ethnic and racial groups (Gondolf, Fisher and McFerron, 1991), but did find that Hispanic women tended to remain in abusive relationships longer than white and black women.

Some non-U.S.-based studies have found gender symmetry in rates as well. An Australian study (Headley et al., 1999) found roughly equivalent rates of violence, but used only the CTS. Like other CTS studies, the Australian data omitted rape and other forms of sexual assault, spousal murder, and assaults by former partners. There was no discussion of whether the violence was initiated by the woman or man, nor whether it was in self-defense. Nor was there any discussion of how many events took place, simply a “have you done this” in the past 12 months. Further analysis of the data also indicated significant reporting discrepancies between women and men.

Perhaps the most compelling comparative data comes from Canada, which also has utilized both family conflict data based on the CTS and also crime victimization studies. Canadian studies based on crime victimization studies find similar rates as in the United States. Canadian data do report some shifts in the direction of males more likely to be victimized than earlier. For example, that the ratio of female to male victims of spousal assaults has dropped from 10:1 in 1993 to about 8.1:1 in 1997. The number of female victims decreased by 8% over that 4-year period, while the number of male victims increased by 18%. If any of that decline in female victims is attributable to feminist efforts to make violence against women less tolerable, it may be a useful policy initiative to make violence against male victims equally socially unacceptable.

The Canadian General Social Survey utilizes a modified CTS in its approach. These annual surveys indicate that 8% of all Canadian women and 7% of Canadian men who were living together in the past year experienced some form of family violence. However, the Canadians corrected many of the omissions or problems associated with the CTS, however, and therefore found important gender asymmetries within that original symmetrical finding. (Canadian data included sexual assault, assault by an ex-partner, spousal homicide, and explored questions of frequency and control-oriented violence.) The Canadian General Social Survey found that women were sexually assaulted about 7 times more often than men, and that women were more than three times more likely (40% to 13% of all violent relationships) to sustain severe injury. Nearly two-fifths (38%) of such women said they feared for their lives, compared with 7% of the men. The frequency of the violence directed at women by their partners was significantly greater than the frequency of violence directed at men. Men who reported any violence by a former partner were more likely to have been slapped, kicked, bitten or hit; women assaulted by an ex-partner were more likely to have been beaten, choked or sexually assaulted. And the Canadian study found three times the number of wives as husbands killed by their spouses in the past two decades (see www.statcan.ca).

Irish data on domestic violence are based largely on crime victimization studies of nationally representative probability samples. As such, they have tended to find lower rates of higher gender asymmetrical levels of violence. In addition, these data include sexual assault and assaults by ex-spouses, which also tend to accurately shift the data in even more gender asymmetrical directions. Such data also stress the systematic nature of domestic violence, rather than its occasional “expressive” outburst. According to the Report of the Task Force on Violence Against Women (cited in the unit “Exploring Masculinities”):

In the majority of incidences of violence against women, including that of sexual assault, the attacker is not a stranger but is known to the victim and is likely to have had an intimate relationship with the woman. Whether it is sexual assault, rape, physical assault or emotional abuse, women are at greater risk from husbands, boyfriends, and male relatives and acquaintances than from strangers. Violent attacks of this nature are rarely once-off occurrences, but are likely to be persistent and frequent with the objective of instilling fear in the victim” (p. 252)

According to Women's Aid, 9,000 women used its services in 1999, and the National network of Refuges and Support Services received over 11,000 calls. In 1998 and 1999, rape and sexual assault were the only crimes that increased; rape increased by 37% and sexual assault by 13%. Thus failure to include rape and sexual assault in domestic violence data could have an even greater impact on Irish data than in other countries where rape and sexual assault rates have dropped.

Why We Should Be Concerned About Women's Violence Towards Men

We should be concerned about women's violence for a variety of reasons. For one thing, compassion with the victims of violence is not a zero-sum game – reasonable people would naturally want to extend compassion, support and interventions to all victims of violence.

Second, acknowledging women's capacity for intimate violence will illuminate the gender symmetry in intimate violence among gay male and lesbian couples. Slightly more than 11% of women living with a same sex partner report being raped, physically assaulted, or stalked by a female cohabitant (compared with 30.4% of women with a live-in male partner). About 15% of men living with a male live-in partner report having experienced violence (compared with 7.7% of men with female live-in partners). (Tjaden and Thoennes, 2000).

Third, perhaps ironically, examining women's violence can better illuminate the dynamics of men's aggression against women. Since women's violence is often retaliatory or self-defense, it may help to expose some of the ways men use violence to control women, and women's perceived absence of option except "fighting back."

Fourth, acknowledging assaults by women are important, Straus writes (1997, p. 210) because they "put women in danger of much more severe retaliation by men." In a recent interview, Straus elaborated, that since women generally suffer greater fear and more injuries, "when she slaps, she sets the stage for him to hit her. The safety of women alone demands we make a big deal of women hitting men" (Slobodian, 2000).

Finally, men actually benefit from efforts to reduce men's violence against women. It turns out that efforts to protect women in the United States have had the effect of reducing the murder rate of men by their partners by almost 70% over the past 24 years. According to James Alan Fox, Professor of Criminal Justice at Northeastern University, homicides by women of their spouses, ex-spouses or boyfriends have steadily declined from 1,357 in 1976 to 424 in 1999. Fox attributes this decline to the availability of alternatives for battered women. "We have given women alternatives, including hotlines, shelters, counseling and restraining orders. Because more battered women have escape routes, fewer wife batterers are being killed," Fox told reporters (Elsner, 2001). A 1999 study by the National Consortium on Violence Research found that the greater availability of hotlines and other resources for battered women, the greater the decline in

homicide of their male partners. (The study found that 80% of these male domestic homicide victims had abused their partners and that nearly two-thirds of female murder victims had been abused before they were killed.)

It turns out that those very initiatives that have greatly benefited women – refuges, hotlines, and the like – save men's lives as well.

Towards an Inclusive Explanation of Domestic Violence

It is certainly possible and politically necessary to acknowledge that some women use violence as a tactic in family conflict while also understanding that men use violence more instrumentally to control women's lives. And these two types of aggression must also be embedded within the larger framework of gender inequality. Women's violence towards male partners certainly does exist, but it is different from that of men: it is far less injurious and less likely to be motivated by attempts to dominate or terrorize the partner (see, for example, Kaufman Kanor and Jasinski, 1998, p. 6).

The different types of data sources, the CTS of family violence studies and the crime victimization rates each point to different problems and are useful in developing different types of intervention strategies. As Straus writes, “research using a broad definition and emphasizing injury may be most useful for informing programs designed to treat offenders or help victims of repeated severe assault.” On the other hand, “research focusing on the act of assault, most of which does not involve injury but does involve millions of couples, may be most useful in informing programs of ‘primary prevention’ i.e. steps that will prevent physical assaults from ever happening” (Straus, 1999).

As Straus concludes:

I believe humanity needs research inspired by the moral agenda and perspective of those who focus on the oppression of women, regardless of whether the oppression is physical, sexual, psychological, or economic; and also research inspired by the moral agenda of those who focus on physical assault, regardless of whether the assault is by a man, woman or child (Straus, 1999, p. 40).

Coupled with studies of parental violence towards children – which routinely find that more than 90% of parents aggress against their children -- Family conflict studies are useful in pointing out the ubiquity and the casualness with which violence structures our quotidian lives. Coupled with data about spousal murder, rape, and other forms of sexual assault, crime victimization data are useful in pointing out the ways in which men's domination over women requires the implicit threat, and often the explicit instrumental use of violence to maintain that power.

Claims of gender symmetry are often made by those who do not understand the data, what the various studies measure and what they omit. Others make claims of gender

symmetry based on disingenuous political motives, attempting to discredit women's suffering by offering abstract statistical equivalences that turn out to be chimerical. Straus and Gelles, themselves, understand the political misuses to which their work has been put, and strongly disavow those political efforts. In a summary of their work, they write:

Perhaps the most controversial finding from our 1975 National Family Violence Survey was the report that a substantial number of women hit and beat their husbands. Since 1975 at least ten additional investigations have confirmed the fact that women hit and beat their husbands. Unfortunately the data on wife-to-husband violence has been misreported, misinterpreted, and misunderstood. Research uniformly shows that about as many women hit men as men hit women. However, those who report that husband abuse is as common as wife abuse overlook two important facts. First, the greater average size and strength of men and their greater aggressiveness means that a man's punch will probably produce more pain, injury and harm than a punch by a woman. Second, nearly three-fourths of the violence committed by women is done in self-defense. While violence by women should not be dismissed, neither should it be overlooked or hidden. On occasion, legislators and spokespersons...have used the data on violence by wives to minimize the need for services for battered women. Such arguments do a great injustice to the victimization of women (Gelles and Straus, [1988], 1999, p. 424, italics added).

And Gelles underscores this disingenuous political use of their work with this clear and unequivocal statement that "it is categorically false to imply that there are the same number of 'battered' men as battered women" (Gelles, 2000). (Note how he even puts the word "battered" in quotations when describing men.) It is not surprising that credible researchers disavow the political ends to which their work is often put.

Despite the dramatic differences in frequency, severity, and purpose of the violence, we should be compassionate towards all victims of domestic violence. Men who are punched, slapped, kicked, bitten, or otherwise assaulted by their wives or partners are no less deserving of compassion, understanding, and intervention than are women who are so assaulted. And male victims deserve access to services and funding, just as female victims do. Nor do they need to be half of all victims in order to deserve either sympathy or services.

But just as surely, compassion and adequate intervention strategies must explore the full range of domestic violence – the different rates of injury, the different types of violence, including sexual assault, and the likelihood of violence by an ex-spouse. Such strategies must also understand the differences between violence that is an expression of family conflict and violence that is instrumental to the control of one partner over the other.

With all the caveats and modifications we have suggested to the family conflict model, and especially the CTS as the standard of measurement, we might predict that violence as

an expression of family conflict, is somewhat less than symmetrical, but include a significant percentage of women. I would hypothesize that, including assaults and murders by ex-spouses, spousal murder, and sexual assault, the gendered incidence of “family conflict” would be closer to one-fourth women and three-fourths men.

On the other hand, violence that is instrumental in the maintenance of control – the more systematic, persistent, and injurious type of violence -- is overwhelmingly perpetuated by men, with rates captured by crime victimizations studies. Over 90% of this violence is perpetuated by men.

When sexual violence and violence by an ex-spouse are considered, the evidence is overwhelming that gender asymmetry in domestic violence remains in full effect. When the Irish Minister of State at the Office of the Tanaiste defines domestic violence as “a process, not a once off event... [that] involves women being subjected to multiple forms of abuse” (emphasis added), the Ministry is still correct in about 90% of all cases.

Men are more violent than women – both inside the home and in the public sphere. As Fagan and Browne conclude, “it is misleading to characterize marital violence as mutual violence” (1994, p. 169). The home is not a refuge from violence, nor is it a site where gender differences in the public sphere are somehow magically reversed. As concerned citizens, we need to be concerned about all victims of violence. And we must also be aware that the perpetrators of that violence – both in public and in private, at home or on the street, and whether the victim is male or female – are men.

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