

# Violence against Women in Families and Relationships

Volume 3  
Criminal Justice and the Law

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*Praeger Perspectives*

**PRAEGER**

*An Imprint of ABC-CLIO, LLC*

A B C  C L I O

Santa Barbara, California • Denver, Colorado • Oxford, England

## Chapter 10

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# Why Sex and Gender Matter in Domestic Violence Research and Advocacy

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Support for efforts to assist battered women increased and spread alongside the growth of the battered women's movement in the 1970s. Institutionalization of this support culminated in the United States with the passage of the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) in 1994. Although awareness of domestic violence as a social problem has increased exponentially over the last 30 years, there continues to be confusion about some of the key terms and concepts related to the problem. The lack of clarity in the language and definitions used in discussions about domestic violence can sometimes make it difficult for people to understand the research on the issue. In this chapter, I describe the difference between sex and gender and explain why this distinction is important to understanding domestic violence.

I use the term "domestic violence" to refer to what Evan Stark has called coercive control, "a course of calculated malevolent conduct employed almost exclusively by men to dominate individual women by interweaving repeated physical abuse with three equally important tactics: intimidation, isolation, and control."<sup>1</sup> This is the specific kind of violence and abuse that led to the passage of VAWA and the establishment of an array of services tailored to battered women. The initial provision of emergency shelter services for battered women was informed by women's disproportionate risk of death and injury at the hands of abusive male partners, even after separation. These services also reflect pervasive cultural norms and economic realities that

present barriers to women when they try to leave an abusive relationship. In order to fully understand the nature of domestic violence and identify the factors that contribute to it, prevent it, and enable survivors to leave safely, it is necessary to consider the multiple social and structural factors that influence women and men's experiences of domestic violence.

While many scholars recognize the contribution of gender to human violence, others would like to frame domestic violence as "gender neutral." Questions frequently raised by these people include "How can domestic violence be a gender issue if women and men are both sometimes violent?" and "How can domestic violence be a gender issue if it happens in same-sex couples?" These questions are based on the incorrect conflation of the concepts of sex and gender. This is not simply a semantic concern.

Proponents of a "gender-neutral" approach assert that the omission of gender is a panacea that will make domestic violence discourse and services gender inclusive, and therefore welcoming and appropriate for male victims and lesbian victims of partner abuse. Proponents of this approach suggest that, by eliminating the discussion and consideration of gender, barriers to seeking services are eliminated for these groups. However, the failure to consider gender does not address the social realities that shape violence against intimate partners or the barriers to help-seeking that these groups report. The omission of gender makes discussions of domestic violence more imprecise and less accurate, but not more inclusive. Domestic violence discourses and services that acknowledge the pervasive influence of gender norms on human experience, rather than seeking to avoid consideration of these factors, would more accurately be termed "gender inclusive"—they include gender. Widespread confusion about what we mean when we talk about violence and gender results from a lack of clarity about the terms sex and gender in scholarly and popular discussions of domestic violence.

## SEX AND GENDER

An elementary discussion of sex and gender might seem unnecessary in a book on domestic violence. However, many scholars and others continue to use the terms interchangeably, often conflating the concepts. This contributes to confusion about the content of the research on domestic violence. Even some experienced scholars continue to make claims about violence and gender based on research that only includes sex variables. For example, John Archer's 2000 meta-analysis of research on sex differences in partner aggression did not include studies on gender (or much of the research on sex differences), but Archer contends that his findings support "gender-free explanations emphasizing individual differences and relationship problems"

for aggression rather than social and cultural factors.<sup>2</sup> Some people rely on this kind of slippage to advance their argument that domestic violence is not a gender issue.

So what are sex and gender? "Sex" refers to the biologically based categories "female" and "male." Although a significant minority of babies are born intersex, babies are typically placed in the category female or male at birth based on biological differences like chromosomes and genitalia. The sex categories female and male are consistent over time and across cultures. Researchers in the social sciences often use the categories female and male as variables in their studies. This allows scholars to compare and contrast the experiences of women and men. When scholars use the variables male or female, they can comment on sex differences, or differences between women and men. This does not mean these differences are biologically determined, only that participants in a given study identify as one sex or the other. In order to make comments about the role of gender in human experience, you need to ask about more than just sex.

Although the terms are often used interchangeably, "gender" is a distinct concept from sex. Gender includes the categories "feminine" and "masculine." Femininity describes the traits stereotypically associated with women, like being caring or emotional. Masculinity refers to the characteristics typically associated with men, such as being tough or stoic. Unlike sex differences, which are stable across cultures and historical periods, gender differs according to time and context. For example, women are currently much more likely than men to wear makeup and high heels. This is not a permanent or universal state of affairs. At other times in history and in other countries, men have also worn high heels or makeup without being considered effeminate.

The distinction between sex and gender is widely recognized in the social sciences, where it has been taught in introductory courses for more than 40 years. However, awareness of the distinction does not always translate into clear and accurate use of the terms in research or writing. The sex-gender distinction was explicitly articulated in 1972 by Ann Oakley, who distinguished sex, the biological categories female and male, from gender, the socially imposed characteristics associated with the sexes and labeled femininity and masculinity. More recent formulations of gender reflect a growing awareness of the ways that gender is context specific, changes over time, and is created in the performance of everyday actions from what we wear to how we walk.

Contemporary understandings of gender also make the connection between cultural pressures around gender and sexuality, noting that social pressure to conform to gender norms is often tied to heterosexuality. In other words, women who are not considered feminine enough are taunted with homophobic slurs like "dyke." Men who are not considered to be masculine enough are mocked with anti-gay slurs

like “fag.” Both of these examples show how women and men who are judged by others to be inadequately enthusiastic or successful at conforming to dominant gender norms have their sexuality called into question. This brings with it the threat of more than just verbal abuse and insults. Hate crimes show how violence is used to enforce gender and sexual norms. Matthew Shepard was killed because he was gay. Brandon Teena (whose story was the subject of the film *Boys Don't Cry*) was killed because he lived life as a man despite being biologically female.

The sex-gender distinction is conceptually important because it challenges the biological determinism that pervades popular notions about human violence. If differences in rates of violence between the sexes are significantly rooted in culture and socialization rather than biology, they are changeable. Prevention and intervention would target those changeable factors contributing to the etiology and persistence of violence. If the causes of violence are “essential,” or biologically determined, on the other hand, cultural and structural changes are ill advised as useless or even harmful. Individual treatment or avoidance strategies would be more helpful. The sex-gender distinction is therefore at the crux of debates about how (and whether) to prevent and respond to domestic violence.

## PATRIARCHY

It is impossible to have an adequate discussion of sex, gender, and violence without also talking about patriarchy. Gender is not only socially constructed but also imbued with hierarchical power relations that are relevant at the individual, interpersonal, and cultural levels. Allan Johnson describes societies as patriarchal to the extent that they constitute male privilege “by being male dominated, male identified, and male centered.”<sup>3</sup> Johnson argues that, although maleness is the “taken-for-granted” normative category against which women are judged, white men “are often made invisible when their behavior is socially undesirable and might raise questions about the appropriateness of male privilege.”<sup>4</sup> Sylvia Walby writes, “Patriarchy is not a historical constant.”<sup>5</sup> It changes form over time, and different components of it become more or less important in different contexts. As explanations of patriarchal peer support for violence assert, the unevenness of patriarchal values and realities across time and context contributes to variation in violent behavior among men.<sup>6</sup>

Contemporary understandings of patriarchy do not suggest that every man has power over every woman in every context, or that all women and all men share the same status. However, they do imply that being biologically male conveys historically specific advantages (i.e., different advantages in different societies) to men relative to women. Although these advantages are independent of race and class,

they interact with race and class systems as well as other sources of social advantage that may reinforce or diminish privileges based on “simply being men.” Patriarchy is explicitly *not* a single factor, although that is sometimes claimed by those antagonistic to feminism. It is instead the intersection of numerous factors relevant at multiple levels of the social ecology.

The authorization, in policy and practice, of putatively “gender-specific” approaches to violence that recognize the experiences of women versus ostensibly gender-neutral perspectives implicitly based on the experiences and authority of men poses a multivalent threat to existing gendered, patriarchal power relations. Anti-feminist men’s reactions to perceptions of the institutionalization of women’s authority (as when a judge believes a woman’s report of violence and issues a restraining order, or police believe a woman’s account of her injuries and arrest her male partner) indicate that this threat may be heightened where the state is called upon to enforce the “female” perspective, as in the following example.

Men risk jail, legal bills, and the loss of family, house, and job if they so much as argue with a woman. This is the result of the widespread “zero tolerance” policy which defines domestic assault as any physical contact, no matter how innocuous. The charge is laid by the state even if no harm has been done. Ostensibly this policy protects women but its real purpose is to emasculate men and persecute heterosexuals. It’s another front in the Rockefeller-based elite’s campaign to degrade society, destroy family, and decrease population by making heterosexuality unworkable.<sup>7</sup>

This kind of overwrought response to the enforcement of assault laws despite the relationship of the abuser to the victim points to the symbolic importance of men’s jurisdiction over the definition of violence in heterosexual relationships. This particular example also links the male prerogative to violence against women with heterosexuality. Like this objection to the enforcement of domestic violence laws, calls for gender neutrality are not really neutral. They seek to reassert patriarchal gender relations by returning things to the way they were before women’s reports of domestic violence were taken seriously. While the loss of the prerogative to define what counts as violence in heterosexual relationships certainly constitutes a loss of privilege for men, this does not mean men are being discriminated against. The objection here is to women’s authority, not men’s subordination.

## THE CONTEXT AND COST OF GENDER BLINDNESS

The demand for formal equality is one tactic that has been appropriated by those who oppose feminism and other movements for social

justice. Formal equality is a legal concept that says all people should be treated the same, according to the same laws and rules. In the past, some feminists used calls for formal equality to attack laws that explicitly discriminated against women. The idea was that by removing legal barriers to women's participation in the workplace, for example, women would be able to attain equal status to men. While this approach may sound appealing on the surface, formal equality has been criticized as exacerbating inequality in practice. While laws may ignore sex or gender, they are applied in a world where these categories continue to be important organizing principles of social life. In other words, rules that ignore gender can have very different outcomes for women and men because of the context in which they are applied.

The best way to understand the problem with demands for formal equality is to look at an example. Contemporary laws against assault ostensibly apply equally to women and men. However, prior to VAWA and state laws targeting domestic violence, police officers routinely declined to enforce laws against assault when the perpetrator was a husband and the victim was his wife. Most police precincts had explicit or implicit policies favoring nonintervention in these cases. The law was blind to the sex of the perpetrator and victim. However, dominant ways of thinking about the family defined it as a private sphere beyond the reach of the law, with men as head of household. Because men are most often assaulted by male acquaintances, and women are most often assaulted by their male partners, this pattern of nonintervention disproportionately affected female victims. This example shows how laws and policies that ignore sex and gender can still have highly gendered outcomes in the real world.

Efforts to oppose the acknowledgment of gender have perhaps focused on violence because this is one of the areas where women's perspectives have arguably had the largest impact on law and policy, with significant implications for both women and men. Although anti-feminism is alive and well, opposition to men's violence against women has expanded, and many popular approaches to the problem carry the implicit threat of validating feminism's complaints about ongoing and institutionalized patriarchy and sexism. As a result, anti-feminist commentators regard VAWA and other efforts to address violence against women as key targets in the battle against feminism.

Demands for gender neutrality in scholarly and popular commentary on domestic violence run counter to the competing trend toward the recognition of the difference between sex and gender, the socially constructed and context-specific nature of gender, and their significant implications for scholarship on public health and social justice. For example, medical research is moving toward a distinction between sex and gender and recognition of the gendered aspects of human experience that contribute to differences in women's and men's health. A

Canadian report on health research argues, "The inclusion of sex and gender as variables in health research is now recognized as good science, and the omission of these variables leads to problems of validity and generalizability, weaker clinical practice and less appropriate health care delivery."<sup>8</sup> Another article observes,

Unfortunately, the language of difference in the biomedical literature is often imprecise, conflating the two terms [sex and gender] and treating them as virtual synonyms. This imprecise use is not only linguistically problematic but has serious implications for future research, clinical practice and treatment, as well as our very understanding of the nature of the health outcomes and status differences that we are studying. Without a strong conceptual and theoretical understanding of the distinction originally intended by those who clarified the difference between sex and gender, confusions are replicated.<sup>9</sup>

The medical writing on the sex-gender distinction makes clear that human behavior is gendered in significant ways that have serious implications for health and well-being. Rather than improving medical practice and research, ignoring the distinction between sex and gender has resulted in the production of flawed data that impair our understanding of the factors contributing to health and disease. Medical examples can perhaps help those interested in violence to understand why it is important to include gender in order to improve health and well-being.

Gender has an impact on health in a variety of ways. Powerlessness and lack of control underlie much of the exposure to HIV/AIDS amongst women in Africa. Disproportionate barriers (that is, relative to men) in access to resources such as food, education, and medical care disadvantage women throughout the developing world. Risk-taking behavior is the norm amongst males throughout the world. Socially defined traits often stereotype men and women as having fixed and opposite characteristics such as active (male) and passive (female), and rational (male) and emotional (female). The language of medicine and its underlying philosophy have equated, and may still equate, male with normal, leaving female to be considered as "other" or, perhaps, abnormal. Both women's and men's occupational and behavioral roles, constrained by social norms, can result in hazardous, though different, exposures to dangers and illness. Any of these aspects of gender may intercede in the pathway from an individual to his or her health.<sup>10</sup>

In other words, leaving gender out has not made health research more inclusive or more effective. Instead, it has hindered our ability to understand the nature of health problems and what is required for prevention. Medical researchers seeking a fuller understanding of health have not set out to limit the factors considered in order to develop a more generic understanding; they have moved toward specificity in

the interest of improving the accuracy of their research and its effectiveness in real-life applications. Scholars of violence would be well advised to take a similar tack, seeking to understand and address the contributing factors specific to violence in different contexts in order to increase, not decrease, our focus and capacity for understanding.

Antifeminists appear to be particularly opposed to the recognition of gender as a relevant factor in domestic violence. Antifeminists display a range of inaccurate interpretations of the word gender in their objections to it. One activist criticizes a book for “misusing gender as if the term were a polite reference to sex,” suggesting that the term was created by feminists because they are antisex: “Having reduced it to [sic] a dirty biological act, feminists dare not speak of sex, so they pervert grammar, which is only the beginning of their assault against our civilization.”<sup>11</sup> Regardless of the reasons for the inaccurate use of the terms sex and gender, the point is that it creates problems for understanding domestic violence.

## **WHY IS GENDER ESSENTIAL TO UNDERSTANDING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE?**

Gender matters because domestic violence, like other forms of human violence, exhibits both sex and gender differences. These differences are important because they help to tell us how and why domestic violence happens. Sex and gender differences are relevant to decisions about where and how to expend scarce resources for domestic violence prevention, intervention, and treatment.

Despite frequently repeated claims to the contrary, the research continues to document significant sex differences in domestic violence. Men are far more likely to kill their intimate partners than women are. Men are also more likely than women to injure their partners and to assault them frequently. They are many times more likely than women to sexually assault their partners. Men are more likely than women to continue abusing their partner after they leave the relationship, for example by stalking, raping, or killing them after separation. These sex differences are not questioned by the vast majority of those who assert that domestic violence is “sex symmetrical.” Rather, proponents of sex symmetry tend to dismiss these forms of violence, claiming that women are just as violent to their spouses as men, or reducing these sex differences to asides such as “Men are just as likely as women to be victims of domestic violence (though women are more likely to be injured).” I argue that the omission and marginalization of these forms and consequences of violence, all of which are integral to domestic violence, render claims of sex symmetry profoundly inaccurate and misleading.

A small number of commentators do explicitly dispute the research on sex differences in domestic violence. Some antifeminists even

dispute the homicide statistics, attributing unsolved homicides to angry wives: “[N]o one knows for sure which sex kills the other more. In a second, we’ll see why it’s likely that more wives kill husbands, but until the government is willing to collect data about the three female methods of killing, we can only do an educated guess.”<sup>12</sup> Others claim that evidence of women’s greater injury is suspect because they believe that women’s injuries are self-inflicted and arrests of men are based on false allegations.

Sex differences in homicide and injury rates relate in fairly obvious ways to the prioritization of emergency services for female victims of domestic violence. Male victims are at much less risk of harm or death during and after domestic violence and on average have greater resources with which to avoid entrapment in an abusive relationship. Many additional factors also point to the sex asymmetry of domestic homicide. Dobash, Dobash, Wilson, and Daly argue,

Studies of actual cases lend no support to the facile claim that homicidal husbands and wives “initiate similar acts of violence.” Men often kill wives after lengthy periods of prolonged physical violence accompanied by other forms of abuse and coercion; the roles in such cases are seldom if ever reversed. Men perpetrate familicidal massacres, killing spouse and children together; women do not. Men commonly hunt down and kill wives who have left them; women hardly ever behave similarly. Men kill wives as part of planned murder-suicides; analogous acts by women are almost unheard of. Men kill in response to revelations of wifely infidelity; women almost never respond similarly, though their mates are more often adulterous. The evidence is overwhelming that a large proportion of the spouse-killings perpetrated by wives, but almost none of those perpetrated by husbands, are acts of self-defense. Unlike men, women kill male partners after years of suffering physical violence, after they have exhausted all available sources of assistance, when they feel trapped, and because they fear for their own lives.<sup>13</sup> (Internal citations omitted)

This passage illustrates the extent to which the meaning of “symmetry” must be distorted in order to suggest that women’s and men’s violence against partners is similar in its etiology or dynamics, or that sex and gender are irrelevant to it. Symmetry means that the sides of something are reciprocal, proportionate, and balanced. As a whole, the body of research on domestic violence does not indicate that it fits that definition.

Although the above quotation refers to consistently documented sex differences in domestic homicide, virtually all of these sex differences are likely contributed to by dominant gender norms. For example, there is a special word for men whose wives are unfaithful, “cuckold,” and no parallel term for a woman whose husband has been unfaithful. Men whose wives cheat on them find their masculinity challenged, while

women's femininity is not called into question by men's cheating. Men's homicide of women in response to suspicions of infidelity is based in part on the different social expectations for women's and men's sexuality and how it reflects on their spouses.

These examples show how the interaction of gendered patriarchal cultural expectations and interpersonal stress is one of the key components of patriarchal peer support for domestic violence. Theories about violence that discuss stress without paying attention to the gendered nature of those stresses are likely to miss an important part of the big picture. For example, research pointing to unemployment as a stress contributing to domestic violence needs to take into account that being a breadwinner is central to most men's masculine identity. Not only is being unemployed stressful because it means less income, but it is also an assault on men's identity *as men*. Research on violent men consistently indicates that the need to defend their "manhood" plays a key role in their violence against men and women. Women do not report similarly gendered motives for violence.

Beyond contributing to motives for lethal and sublethal violence, gender shapes domestic violence in myriad other ways. Looking at abused mothers can help to illustrate the impact of gender. Women continue to be responsible for the majority of child care. The expectation that women take on this primary responsibility means that women are more likely than men to take on employment that is flexible or limited in order to accommodate child care. Some women leave the workforce altogether to care for children. Being away from work, or taking on limited employment to facilitate child care, has permanent implications for women's earning power.

In the event of domestic violence, a stay-at-home mom will probably have a very difficult time securing a job that will support her and her children. The lack of affordable child care will further harm her ability to attain economic self-sufficiency. Meanwhile, men's relative freedom from child care responsibilities during the relationship, including housework, grocery shopping, and other personal services still mostly performed by women, permanently enhances fathers' earning power. When a battered woman goes to court to try to get sole custody of her children to protect them from further exposure to abuse, the judge may well count her low income against her, ruling that the father can provide a better home for the child because he has more money. In addition, the judge may assume that the father will soon enter another relationship with another woman who will provide surrogate care for the children, while the newly divorced mom will likely be working full-time to make ends meet, and is less likely to remarry. As a result, women's disproportionate child care during the marriage can actually harm their chances at getting custody when they leave an abusive husband.

Abusive fathers often take advantage of the closeness that comes from mothers' disproportionate caregiving role. Many abusers threaten to harm or kill the children to keep the mother from leaving, or get her to bargain away child support in return for more time with the kids. Many abusers also use the expectation that mothers care for their children as a tool in emotional abuse, criticizing their partner's parenting skills and accusing them of being bad mothers. Others make false claims of child abuse to Child Protective Services in order to punish women for reporting the violence they have experienced or for seeking a divorce. In turn, child protection workers often hold mothers responsible for exposing children to men's violence rather than holding the violent man himself accountable for his behavior. All of these examples show how gendered social expectations contribute to the dynamics of violence and abuse as well as having an impact on the ability to leave an abuser safely. I am sure that readers can think of many other ways that gender norms can shape abusive behavior and its implications.

Ironically, the difficulties that men have when their interpersonal relationships do not match community expectations for male domination are a recurrent theme in antifeminist objections to recognizing the contributions of patriarchy and gender to domestic violence. Antifeminist writers claim that men report domestic violence much less often than women and use this claim to explain why there are so few reports of women battering men and so few men seeking services as victims of domestic violence. Consider the following examples:

- "Men who are abused by their wives are fodder for jokes."<sup>14</sup>
- "The one defining characteristic of most abused men is that they are extremely embarrassed by their predicament. Most men who have reached out for help have been laughed at or scorned. They are often portrayed as weak and cowardly."<sup>15</sup>
- "Men are also less likely to call the police, even when there is injury, because, like women, they feel shame about disclosing family violence. But for many men, the shame is compounded by the shame of not being able to keep their wives under control. Among this group, a 'real man' would be able to keep her under control. Moreover, the police tend to share these same traditional gender role expectations."<sup>16</sup>
- "In 18th- and 19th-century France, a husband who had been pushed around by his wife would be forced by the community to wear women's clothing and to ride through the village, sitting backwards on a donkey, holding its tail. . . . This humiliating practice, called the charivari, was also common in other parts of Europe. . . . Modern versions of the charivari persist today. Take Skip W., who participated in a program on domestic violence aired on the short-lived Jesse Jackson Show in 1991. Skip related how his wife repeatedly hit him and attacked him with knives and scissors. The audience's reaction was exactly what male victims who go public fear most: laughter, and constant, derisive snickering."<sup>17</sup>

These same commentators insist that a sex- and gender-blind approach to domestic violence is the answer to these men's problems. They argue that taking a formal equality tack and talking about domestic violence as if it were sex symmetrical would make men more comfortable in asking for help. This logic is fatally flawed, however. As these quotations illustrate, patriarchal gender norms are a primary reason that violence against men is not taken seriously. The quotations above all point to the threat of feminization, made menacing by the low status accorded to women in patriarchal societies, as a shaming tactic used to punish men who fail to dominate their wives or partners. This enforcement of patriarchal gender norms is precisely what feminists talk about in their references to domestic violence as shaped by gender and patriarchy. Patriarchal gender norms have negative implications for men as well as women, but ignoring sex and gender does nothing to loosen their grip.

Domestic violence varies according to the relative status of both partners, and there is still much to learn about these variations. However, if we accept the antifeminists' own claims about why men allegedly don't report victimization by women (which as of yet are based on speculation, not research), neither leaving gender out nor talking more about male victims will solve the problem. In order to decrease the shame of being dominated by a woman, it would be necessary to challenge the patriarchal gender norms for dominance, invulnerability, and male supremacy that are the source of that shame. After all, the existing vocabulary for men who do not dominate "their" women is already rich, frequently used, and highly gendered: hen pecked, pussy whipped, browbeaten, fag, pussy, queer, and so on. The solution would appear to be in addressing the source of shame for each of these terms—challenges to male supremacy and heteronormativity.

## WHAT ABOUT SAME-SEX DOMESTIC VIOLENCE?

Some commentaries point to violence in gay and lesbian relationships as evidence that domestic violence is not gendered. Although explicit discussion of domestic violence against gay men is notably absent from the antifeminist analysis of domestic violence against men, the assertion that same-sex couples experience domestic violence, too, is used to challenge both the existence of patriarchy and the relevance of gender to domestic violence. Antifeminist commentators suggest that feminist analyses of domestic violence as gendered and gender roles as tied to patriarchy are invalidated by the existence of women who are abusers and victims who are men. This claim is also based on a misunderstanding of the concept of gender, which is about socially prescribed roles rather than biological sex or sexuality.

Claims that domestic violence in same-sex relationships proves that gender is irrelevant also ignore the influence of homophobia on

violence against gay and lesbian people. As we saw above, homophobia is linked to rigid patriarchal gender roles. Hatred of gays and lesbians is based on naturalized ideas about sexuality, which prescribe heterosexual relationships and stigmatize homosexual ones, in part because they contradict cultural ideals for gender-polarized heterosexual couples. Rather than refuting the influence of gender, domestic violence in gay and lesbian relationships demonstrates how gender norms shape violence and the likelihood it will be reported. Domestic violence in gay and lesbian relationships, by highlighting the specific needs of the community, reveals the need to respond to different forms of domestic violence in ways that consider their social context. The fact that women can abuse women and men can abuse men does not cancel out the importance of gender to violence and abuse. We need to create services that are explicitly designed for gay and lesbian victims of violence and can address the additional barriers that homophobia creates alongside gender.

Writing about gay men and domestic violence also sometimes denies that gender has anything to do with abuse; for example, Patrick Island and David Letellier state, "Domestic violence is not a gender issue, since both men and women can be either batterer or victim."<sup>18</sup> However, later in their book there is a section entitled "Batterers Are Unclear on the Concept of Masculinity." In this section, rigid gender roles are named as a fundamental contributing factor to abuse: "All violent men who batter and abuse their partners are obviously confused about the concept of masculinity."<sup>19</sup> Like the antifeminist discussion of battering, this is clearly a question of vocabulary. Although Island and Letellier describe their desire to expand the work of the battered women's movement, they are not aware of the sex-gender distinction and so misunderstand feminist claims about gender to the extent that they claim to reject them while their writings actually reinforce many feminist claims about gender and domestic violence.

## **WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR VIOLENCE PREVENTION AND INTERVENTION?**

Although much media attention has been devoted to the debate over whether sex differences are relevant to domestic violence, sex differences are of limited interest to those who are primarily concerned with understanding violence in order to prevent it, decrease it, and effectively intervene in it. There is no question that the research on domestic violence shows marked sex differences in the dynamics, frequency, and outcomes of domestic violence, especially when domestic violence-related sexual assault, separation assault, stalking, and homicide are included. The domestic violence research has not focused on assessing whether or not sex differences exist in domestic violence, but rather on

the dynamics of the violence. These dynamics show that gender matters considerably to victims and perpetrators.

I argue that those who would enhance our collective understanding of domestic violence need to be familiar with the research on the causes and character of domestic violence, including the copious body of research produced by feminist scholars and others who recognize gender and sex differences in domestic violence. At the very least, those presuming to critique feminist perspectives on domestic violence must understand the basic terms and concepts of this research. In addition, researchers and commentators should work to articulate the different dynamics and outcomes of domestic violence based on gender, sexuality, power, and other salient factors, rather than blurring these important distinctions by making claims about symmetry.

Efforts to maintain the invisibility of socially constructed patriarchal gender norms pose significant problems for work to prevent and intervene in domestic violence. Antifeminist authors are so concerned with keeping gender out of the discussion about domestic violence that they fail to take seriously even the incontrovertible sex differences in domestic violence dynamics, outcomes, and fatalities. This requires silencing survivors of violence, those who work with them, and the parts of batterer narratives that implicate patriarchal gender roles in the violence. It also requires dismissing much of the research on domestic violence in favor of a narrow focus on survey research emphasizing self-reported counts of a limited number of aggressive acts taken out of context. In silencing many of those who are most familiar with domestic violence, antifeminist approaches impede the dissemination of accurate information and obstruct efforts to prevent this violence and intervene effectively on behalf of survivors. In ignoring the dynamics, outcomes, and causes of violence, gender-blind approaches render prevention unlikely or impossible in favor of interventions after abuse has occurred.

Proponents of a “gender-free” perspective on domestic violence claim they are protecting men from women’s rhetorical and physical violence by refuting explanations of domestic violence that take gender into account. They claim that research that acknowledges the role that gender plays in domestic violence intentionally obscures the fact that men are also victims, and women are also perpetrators, in order to shore up bogus claims about the relevance of gender and the patriarchal culture that shapes it. Those who insist upon excluding gender from discourse on, and consideration of, domestic violence often claim that such an omission is the only way to *really* know about domestic violence.

Contrary to antifeminist claims, however, the lack of comprehension of feminist research demonstrated by the conflation of sex and gender demands a more careful consideration of feminist writing about domestic violence, not its dismissal. Not only is domestic violence a

gendered phenomenon, but the failure to distinguish between sex and gender impedes accurate and adequate understandings of the problem. In order to be truly inclusive, those concerned with domestic violence need to listen carefully to batterers, survivors, advocates, and researchers in order to better understand the multiple, context-specific causes of human violence and potential avenues for prevention.

## NOTES

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