

Claims About Women's Use of Non-fatal Force in Intimate Relationships: A Contextual Review of Canadian Research

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Molly Dragiewicz¹ and Walter S. DeKeseredy¹

Abstract

Claims that violence is gender-neutral are increasingly becoming “common sense” in Canada. Antifeminist groups assert that the high rates of woman abuse uncovered by major Canadian national surveys conducted in the early 1990s are greatly exaggerated and that women are as violent as men. The production of degendered rhetoric about “intimate partner violence” contributes to claims that women’s and men’s violence is symmetrical and mutual. This article critically evaluates common claims about Canadian women’s use of nonlethal force in heterosexual intimate relationships in the context of the political struggle over the hegemonic frame for violence and abuse. The extant Canadian research documenting significant sex differences in violence and abuse against adult intimate partners is reviewed.

Keywords

backlash, Canada, sex differences, woman abuse

Claims that violence is gender-neutral are increasingly becoming “common sense” in Canada (Minaker & Snider, 2006, p. 755). Antifeminist groups assert that the high rates of woman abuse uncovered by major Canadian national surveys conducted in the early 1990s¹ are greatly exaggerated and that women are as violent as men. The production of degendered rhetoric about “intimate partner violence” (IPV) contributes to claims that women’s and men’s violence is symmetrical and mutual (DeKeseredy, 2011; Sinclair, 2003).

¹University of Ontario Institute of Technology, Oshawa, ON, Canada

Corresponding Author:

Molly Dragiewicz, Faculty of Social Science and Humanities, University of Ontario Institute of Technology, 2000 Simcoe St. North, Oshawa, ON, Canada L1H 7K4

Email: molly.dragiewicz@uoit.ca

In Canada, social problems such as violence and abuse are subject to the “politics of need interpretation” (Fraser, 1989, p. 292), wherein social issues are hotly contested in public discourse. Nancy Fraser (1989) argues that in late-capitalist welfare state societies, discursive struggles over social resources and power are often framed in terms of competing needs. Power struggles are played out in debates over which social issues should be framed as legitimate political concerns and which should be enclaved as nonpolitical matters. Discourses on women, men, and violence are one location where such struggles are highly visible in Canada. The objective of this article is to review some common claims about Canadian women’s use of nonlethal force in heterosexual intimate relationships in the context of the political struggle over the hegemonic frame for violence and abuse.

Changes in Canadian Discourses on Abuse Over Time

Although there has been episodic concern with violence against women throughout Canadian history, men’s physical abuse of female intimate partners has only recently become a matter of general interest. In the 1970s, an exhaustive bibliography on wife beating could be written on an index card (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2002). Feminists in Canada worked to establish a public discourse that not only communicated the profound impact of men’s violence on individual women, but also explicitly framed woman abuse as “part of a larger problem of social inequality between men and women” (Randall, 1989, p. 1).

Since then, scholars and advocates have produced an extensive research literature on woman abuse. One of the key outcomes of this work has been a monumental change in public discourses about woman abuse, shifting it from a private, personal issue to a political and social problem that foregrounds the experiences of abused women. What Martin D. Schwartz and Walter DeKeseredy (1993) stated 17 years ago still holds true today: “Right now, there is an important battle being waged over the nature of women’s behavior and its role in woman abuse” (p. 249). Although many people continue to use terms such as “woman abuse,” there are also many who fervently contend that we should use degendered terms like “family violence” or IPV (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2010; H. Johnson & Dawson, 2011; Sinclair, 2003). Their rationale is heavily based on some Canadian national survey data, which, at first glance, show that violence in intimate, heterosexual relationships is sex-symmetrical. Others claim degendered terms are more inclusive (Denham & Gillespie, 1999; Sinclair, 2003). Regardless of the reasons people use degendered language, it suggests that women and men are similarly affected by violence and similarly responsible for it (DeKeseredy, 2011; Ellis & DeKeseredy, 1996; Kurz, 1989).

Prior to 1970, there was no name for violence against women by intimate partners in Canada. In the mid-1970s, feminists began to talk about violence against women, created the first emergency shelters, and pushed for legal reform. In this period, antiviolence activists used the terms “wife beating” and “wife battering” to evoke the severity of the problem (DeKeseredy & MacLeod, 1997; Walker, 1990). Feminists later adopted the term “woman abuse” to more accurately reflect the variety of behaviors that comprise abuse, and the fact that abuse extends to intimate relationships beyond marriage (Adams, Sullivan, Bybee, & Greeson, 2008; DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2009; Randall, 1989; Sinclair, 2003; Stark, 2007).

Although feminists succeeded in moving the normative response to woman abuse from silence to condemnation, feminist efforts to frame men's violence against women as a social problem in the context of patriarchy have consistently met with resistance. As early as 1977, the United Way funded a symposium on "family violence" in British Columbia. The federal government established a National Clearinghouse on Family Violence (NCFV) in 1982, and Health and Welfare Canada created the Family Violence Prevention Division in 1986. A number of Canadian researchers and commentators continue to insist upon the use of such gender-blind terms.

Claims About Women's Violence Against Intimates in Canada

On June 26, 2002, the *Globe and Mail's* web site announced: "Men as Likely to Suffer Spousal Abuse, Statscan Says" (Lawlor, 2002, p. 1). The story described a study that used telephone interviews to ask a national sample of Canadians slightly modified versions of items included in the Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS). The study, Canada's 1999 General Social Survey on Victimization (GSS), found that 8% of 14,269 women and 7% of 11,607 men reported at least one incident of intimate partner violence committed by a current or ex-spouse between 1994 and 1999 (Statistics Canada, 2002).² As was the case with some earlier studies (Jiwani, 2000; Schwartz & DeKeseredy, 1993; Steinmetz, 1977-78), these results were seized upon by some journalists and antifeminist groups to support claims about an invisible epidemic of husband battering. For example, Earl Silverman from the Family of Men Support Society told the *Globe and Mail* that Statistics Canada's findings show "that there has been a severe bias against men in the past not considering them as victims" and "[t]o try to deny the other side of the coin reduces the credibility of the first side" (quoted in Foss, 2002, p. 8).

Statistics Canada's 2004 GSS produced similar findings for 1999-2004, with 6% of men and 7% of women reporting being victimized by a spouse (Statistics Canada, 2005). This study is also used to support claims about the bidirectionality or gender-neutrality of abuse. DeKeseredy and Schwartz (2003) found that regardless of its attempt to remain relatively autonomous, Statistics Canada has indirectly contributed to making terms like spousal violence a central "part of our everyday popular lexicon." Statscan's recent surveys have been "appropriated and exploited by a variety of antifeminist pundits and organizations" (Hammer, 2002, p. 111). For example, Donald Dutton states that, "in Canada and the United States, women use violence in intimate relationships to the same extent as men, for the same reasons, and with largely the same results" (2006, p. ix)³.

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

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

Intimate Partner Abuse Against Men dismisses women's greater injuries and studies documenting other sex differences, including research distinguishing offensive and defensive violence. For example, the NCFV (2004) states, "[s]ome scholars suggest that the motives for intimate partner abuse against men by women may differ from those for abuse against women by men, and that women suffer more severe injuries than men" (p. 1).⁴ Despite extensive documentation of such differences, the report characterizes women's and men's violence as "comparable," and asserts that "[i]t is also important for the perpetrators of intimate partner abuse—men or women—to recognize that violence in any form is both morally and legally wrong" (p. 1).⁵ Many people would agree with Minaker and Snider (2006) who argue that:

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

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

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

Researchers, by providing statistical evidence documenting the extent of wife abuse, have played a critical role in making it a social issue. Social scientists have been particularly important in surveying this problem. Their statistics on the extent of battering are cited to legitimate concern in books, professional journals, and the popular press. (p. 489)

Although feminists struggled to establish woman abuse as a political concern demanding public action, the contemporary use of gender-neutral language has the potential to reverse these changes by again obscuring women's particular needs, interests, and experiences (H. Johnson & Dawson, 2011; Sinclair, 2003).

Critiques of Research Cited to Promote Degendered Perspectives

In Canada, proponents of degendered conceptualizations of violence typically cite recent national government survey data generated using renditions of the CTS. Murray Straus

(1979) developed the CTS to study violence within families. Applied to violence in intimate relationships, this measure and the more recent CTS-2 (Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996) solicit information from men and women about the various tactics they used to resolve conflicts in their relationships. Most versions of the CTS consist of at least 18 items that measure at least three different ways of handling interpersonal conflict in relationships: reasoning, verbal aggression (referred to by some researchers as psychological abuse), and violence. Although widely used, the CTS is a highly controversial measure and must be administered with caution.⁶

Claims of sex symmetry are deceptive for several reasons. First, the 1999 and 2004 GSS conducted by Statistics Canada provide only raw counts of violent acts and thus miss the fact that much male and female violence is used for different reasons (DeKeseredy, 2009; Jiwani, 2000). As demonstrated by studies that add context, meaning, and motive measures to the CTS, a common cause of women's violence is self-defense (DeKeseredy, 2007), whereas men more typically use violence to control their partners (DeKeseredy & Dragiewicz, 2007). Therefore, York University sociologist Desmond Ellis reminds us that, "[i]gnoring context, meaning and motive is misinforming . . . [a]nd not separating different types of violence is misleading" (quoted in Foss, 2002, p. 2).

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

- The CTS excludes measures of the meaning, motive, and context of acts (Straus, 2007);
- Males are more likely to underreport violence perpetration (DeKeseredy, 2009; Edleson & Brygger, 1996; Heckert & Gondolf, 2000; Hilton, Harris, & Rice, 2000; Szinovacz & Egley, 1995);
- Females are more likely to overreport violence perpetration (Hilton et al., 2000; Szinovacz, 1983; Szinovacz & Egley, 1995);
- Abusers regularly minimize, deny, and justify their violence and abuse (Anderson & Umberson, 2001; Buchbinder & Eisikovits, 2004; Heckert & Gondolf, 2000; Henning & Holdford, 2006; Ptacek, 1990; Totten, 2003);
- The CTS measures only conflict-instigated violence and ignores male violence used to control women or violence that may not stem from any single identifiable cause (e.g., dispute, difference, or spat) (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 1998a);
- The CTS excludes several types of abusive behavior, such as separation assault, stalking, and threats to take the children (Jiwani, 2000); and
- Surveys based on self-reports of victimization necessarily omit homicide, familyicide, and homicide-suicide.

In addition to using GSS data and similar findings to support the claim of the bidirectionality of violence,⁷ proponents of sex symmetry artificially narrow the definition of violence between intimates to obscure injurious behaviors that display marked sex asymmetry, such as sexual assault, strangulation, separation/divorce assault, stalking, and

homicide. Rather than an unacceptable or hysterical broadening of the definition of violence, these behaviors are commonly part of abused women's experiences (DeKeseredy & Dragiewicz, 2007; DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2009).

Criticisms of the CTS and data on forms of woman abuse that it does not measure are typically not recognized by supporters of gender-blind definitions (DeKeseredy, 2011), including Canadian politicians who were members of the 1998 Special Joint Committee on Child Custody and Access (SJC). For example, the SJC concluded that, "because of the existence of violence against men, the Committee would not recommend that family law or divorce legislation employ a gender-specific definition of family violence" (Pearson & Gallaway, 1998, p. 81). Prior to coming to this conclusion, the SJC had access to Canadian national survey data showing that only a distinct minority of female undergraduates reported that they had initiated a physical attack since leaving high school and that much of the violence reported by women was in self-defense or fighting back (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 1998b). Walter DeKeseredy publicly presented these findings to the SJC, but they and similar results uncovered by other researchers (e.g., Saunders, 1986) were not included in the SJC's final report and they are ignored by prominent critics of feminist research on intimate violence (e.g., Dutton, 2006; Mills, 2003). The marginalization of research findings documenting the differential impact of women's and men's violence against intimates by the SJC is one illustration of how the use of gender-neutral terms does not translate into policies that accurately reflect the research.

Misuse and Misinterpretation of Research

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

There are two primary contexts for the increasing use of bidirectional terms. The first is efforts to render discourses on woman abuse "gender-neutral" so that they will ostensibly be more inclusive of same-sex violence and violence against men. Although there is undoubtedly a need for more services, including those specifically targeting the different populations at risk for abuse,⁸ simply excluding gender does not make services more inclusive. For example, lesbian survivors of violence criticize the ways that some existing services for heterosexual women fail to meet their needs, advocating for materials and programs that explicitly and specifically target lesbian women (Girshick, 2002). NCFV's own discussion paper on gay men and abuse indicates that patriarchal gender norms are key impediments to effectively addressing the violence (Kirkland, 2004). Hence, there are calls for language and resources based on the specific needs of particular communities. Scholars and advocates working on same-sex intimate partner violence explicitly reject a

generic model that obscures patriarchal and heterosexist gender norms. Instead, they most often call for an intersectional understanding of violence which recognizes “the multiple nature of identity, and the interlocking nature of systems of privilege and oppression to show how the categories of race, class, sex, gender, and sexuality rely on each other to function within systems of domination” (Ristock, 2005, pp. 9-10).⁹

Antifeminist groups claim that men’s low rate of reporting victimization to police, service providers, and medical personnel is due to the stigma of being unable to control their female partners and therefore being perceived as effeminate or gay (e.g., too similar to women). The assertion that men are less likely to report violence or abuse perpetrated by an intimate is unsupported by research. Although some studies find that men are less likely to report violence to police, this is as likely due to differences in the severity and nature of the violence, as to gendered reporting patterns. One early Ontario study found that men were more likely than women to press charges against intimates and less likely to drop charges once filed (Kincaid, 1982). In the study sample, there were 17 times as many female victims as male victims. Twenty-two percent of the female victims laid charges and nearly 40% of the men did. Of those who filed charges, men were less likely to drop them than women, with 2.8% of men and 5% of women dropping the charges (Kincaid, 1982). Dobash, Dobash, Wilson, and Daly (1992) note that claims that men underreport violent victimization relative to women are largely undocumented, but multiple studies have documented women’s low reporting rates and the reasons for them. Even if the research did support the notion that men underreport victimization relative to women, the use of gender-blind terms cannot solve this alleged problem. The above examples point to the need for discourses and policies that explicitly challenge patriarchal, heterosexist norms for gender and sexuality rather than simply ignoring them.

Efforts to repudiate feminism are the second context of the push for language that ignores gender (Minaker & Snider, 2006). Since woman abuse is one of the most graphic manifestations of gender inequality (General Assembly, 2006), it is one area where women’s perspectives are widely acknowledged in public policy and scholarship (Dragiewicz, 2008). Antifeminists resent linking woman abuse to patriarchy and seek to separate discussions of violence from analyses of gender inequality (Lupri, 2005). Some scholars object to studies of violence and abuse that emphasize the importance of gender, power, and context, claiming feminists have “created a climate of fear that inhibits research” for those who continue to do decontextualized counts of behaviors (Munro, 2008, p. 35). The antipathy for gender-conscious research is evident in the explicit attacks against feminism by antifeminist scholars and activists. They do not just advocate more attention to male victims (they usually ignore same-sex victims after claiming that abuse in lesbian couples proves women are just as violent as men), they demand the renunciation of feminism and the research, laws, and programs they deem feminist (Dutton, 2006; Girard, 2009). The research in this vein is frequently used by antifeminist groups to attack funding for services and programs that acknowledge the gendered realities of violence (Dragiewicz, 2008, 2011).

Use of gender-blind terms frequently occurs alongside the characterization of “spousal violence” as typically mutual, minor, infrequent, and not resulting in injuries. Some antifeminist scholars argue that, “intimate violence is a two-way street” (Lupri, 2005), best

addressed privately and without criminal consequences (Dutton, 2006). However, this view does not accurately reflect the phenomenon of ongoing coercive control, battering, or abuse that public policy and programs were created to prevent and control (Stark, 2007). The idea of violence as mutual and minor mirrors the conceptualization of violence that preceded and necessitated the creation of special laws, policies, and services targeting woman abuse.

Typologies of Intimate Partner Violence and Abuse

Some scholars attempt to bridge or explain the gap between gendered and gender-blind theories of violence by offering typologies (Eckhardt, Holtzworth-Munroe, Norlander, Sibley, & Cahill, 2008; M. P. Johnson, 2008; M. P. Johnson & Ferraro, 2000, Pence & Dasgupta, 2006). It may be useful to observe that the types of violence labeled as intimate terrorism, violent resistance, and situational couple violence are qualitatively different from infrequent, noninjurious acts that invoke no fear or coercion. The CTS is not the only means of operationalizing typologies such as Michael Johnson's (2008), but studies based mainly on the CTS or other decontextualized measures provide no information that can be used to characterize incidents as representative of one type of violence or another (DeKeseredy, 2011). It is impossible to make accurate claims about the motives of violence based on numbers of acts, as DeKeseredy pointed out in his critique of Michael Johnson's typology of violence at the National Institute of Justice's Gender Symmetry of Violence Workshop (National Institute of Justice, 2000). Certainly, motivations for violent and controlling behavior vary and even Michael Johnson acknowledged, "qualitative research and rich interview data would be necessary to thoroughly understand the meaning and social context" (quoted in National Institute of Justice, 2000).

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

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

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

There is, indeed, empirical support for typologies such as those developed by Michael Johnson, and Amy Holtzworth-Munroe, and their colleagues (e.g., Holtzworth-Munroe, Meehan, Herron, Rehman, & Stuart, 2000; M. P. Johnson, 2008; Leone, Johnson, & Cohan, 2007). Still, some critics like Pence and Dasgupta (2006) caution that typologies are likely

to be misused. They note that it is all too easy for abusers and their allies to paint individual incidents as “situational” or aberrant violence even when they are not, and that this can have life and death consequences. Although shelter staff and scholars recognize that not all violence is the same, and not all violence that takes place in the home is necessarily battering (Dasgupta, 2002; Osthoff, 2002), there is no tool that can discern whether an individual act is part of a broader pattern of coercive control. Accordingly, antiviolence advocates continue to call for assessments that place violence and abuse in the context of the relationship, family, community, culture, and history (Bonisteel & Green, 2005).

Research Findings on Sex Differences in Violence and Abuse Against Intimates and Former Intimates

Policymakers, scholars, practitioners, and others seeking to better understand violence and abuse and to improve prevention and control strategies should be aware of critiques of the research used to support claims of sex symmetry.¹⁰ However, these critiques comprise only a small portion of the research landscape. Although some media reports focus on the alleged symmetry documented in recent Canadian surveys, Statistics Canada’s own official reports also document substantial differences in the amount and impact of violence experienced by women and men. The GSS and other incident-based measures of violence will never be able to discern the nature or meaning of individual acts in the absence of questions about meaning, motive, and context. Nonetheless, official Canadian government sources do find significant sex differences that should not be ignored.

GSS Findings on Sex Differences

Family Violence in Canada: A Statistical Profile 2000 notes that 8% of women and 7% of men “experienced some type of violence by a partner during the previous 5 years” (Pottie Bunge & Locke, 2000, p. 5). The report also highlights several substantial sex differences often ignored by the media, including:

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

Family Violence in Canada: A Statistical Profile 2011 reports similar, if slightly lower numbers:

Of the 19 million Canadians who had a current or former spouse in 2009, 6% reported being physically or sexually victimized by their partner or spouse in the preceding five years. . . . Overall, a similar proportion of males and females reported having experienced spousal violence in the previous 5 years. (Brennan, 2011, pp. 8-9)¹¹

Although the latest report includes little data disaggregated by sex, it notes that:

Females report more serious violence than males. . . . For example in 2009, females who reported spousal violence were about three times more likely than males (34% versus 10%)¹² to report that they had been sexually assaulted, beaten, choked, or threatened with a gun or knife by their partner or ex-partner in the previous 5 years. (Brennan, 2011, p. 10)

In addition, Brennan (2011) noted that 57% of the female victims and 40% of the male victims reported “multiple victimizations” (p. 9). Twice as many women (42% vs. 18%) reported being injured by their partner (p. 13). Women were also three times more likely (15% vs. 5%) to have obtained a restraining order against their abuser (p. 12). Even a cursory glance at these findings indicates that the violence experienced by women and men is neither similar nor equivalent.

Crime Data Documenting Sex Differences

Crime data are widely recognized as underreporting violence and abuse by intimates. This is because crime data derived from police reports or other official sources (e.g., court records) describe only the minority of incidents that come to the attention of the criminal justice system. Mainstream crime and victimization surveys document a larger number of incidents, but consistently garner much lower reporting rates than studies specifically designed to measure sensitive issues like woman abuse and sexual assault (DeKeseredy, 2007; H. Johnson, 1998). In *Family Violence in Canada: A Statistical Profile 2008*, Bressan (2008) notes that GSS findings indicate that only 28% of what she terms “incidents of spousal abuse” are reported to police (p. 11). Bressan also points out that emotional, psychological, and economic abuse are not chargeable offenses under the Canadian Criminal Code and are therefore excluded from official crime statistics.

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

Although each of these sources has limitations, the numbers underscore the profound effect of research methods on study findings. Statistics are never self-explanatory, and require contextualization to facilitate proper interpretation. Unfortunately, decontextualized government survey data are often used to the exclusion of other data in misleading ways. Although police reports and GSS data greatly underestimate the incidence and prevalence of violence and abuse, they provide some information about the types of violence most likely to come to the attention of police, the courts, and service providers. Numerous

Table 1. Number of Assaults Against Women in 1993 Recorded by Police, the GSS, and the VAWS

Source	Physical assault (perpetrated by a spouse)	Sexual assault (by any perpetrator)
Police reports	46,800	15,200
GSS	107,500	316,000
VAWS	201,000	572,000

Note: GSS = General Social Survey on Victimization. VAWS = Violence Against Women Survey.
Table adapted from H. Johnson (1998, pp. 41-42).

Table 2. Sex Differences in Outcomes of Intimate Partner Violence

Outcome	% Female victims		% Male victims	
	2006	2011	2006	2011
Were physically injured	44	42	19	18
Received medical attention	13	Not reported	2	Not reported
Were hospitalized	10	Not reported by sex	2	Not reported by sex
Took time off daily activities	29	Not reported by sex	10	Not reported by sex
Experienced 10 or more assaults	21	Not reported	11	Not reported
Feared for their lives	34	Not reported by sex	10	Not reported by sex

Table adapted from H. Johnson (2006, p. 33) and Brennan (2011, p. 13).

additional charts illustrating marked sex differences in intimate partner violence can be found in *Family Violence in Canada: A Statistical Profile 2008* (Bressan, 2008), and *Family Violence in Canada: A Statistical Profile 2000* (Pottie Bunge, 2000; Pottie Bunge & Locke, 2000).

Although the relevant section of the most recent edition of *Family Violence in Canada: A Statistical Profile 2011* (Brennan, 2011) also includes some charts that show marked sex differences, it does not report the data reflected in the charts. As a result, readers cannot discern the specific statistical differences that they could in earlier reports. In addition, many of the items that showed significant sex differences in earlier versions are not included in the most recent report; are reported aggregated by sex; or are aggregated across multiple items (e.g., “physically or sexually victimized”). As a result, the amount and nature of abuse experienced by women and men is largely obscured rather than illustrated by the most recent report.

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

Table 3. Impact of Intimate Partner Violence by Sex

Outcome	% Female victims		% Male victims	
	2006	2011	2006	2011
Used social services	47	Not reported by sex	20	Not reported by sex
Reported to police	36	23	17	7
Children witnessed violence against victim	40	Not reported	25	Not reported

Table adapted from H. Johnson (2006, p. 34) and Brennan (2011, p. 11).

Table 4. Number and Percentage of Women and Men Aged 15 Years and Above Who Reported Sexual Assault by a Current or Former Spouse

Perpetrator	% Female victims		% Male victims	
	2000	2011	2000	2011
Current partner	8	Not reported	“Amount too small to be expressed”	Not reported
Former partner	27	Not reported	5	Not reported

Table adapted from Pottie Bunge (2000, p. 13) & Brennan (2011).

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

Sexual Assault

Sexual assault is also left out of discussions about sex symmetry, even though large- and small-scale Canadian surveys show that many women are hurt by a myriad of sexually abusive behaviors (DeKeseredy, 2011; H. Johnson, 1996; H. Johnson & Dawson, 2011). Note, too, that Statistics Canada’s recent publications devote minimal attention to this form of violence, and only one question about spousal sexual assault was included in the 1999 GSS. Still, Table 4 shows that this rudimentary measure uncovered striking sex differences in sexual assault in both current and former relationships.

Since sexual assault is frequently part of woman abuse, ignoring this type of violence to make claims about sex symmetry seriously distorts both women’s and men’s experiences in a way that obfuscates rather than illustrates the realities of violence and abuse.

Conclusion

As this article documents, gender-blind discourses misrepresent the research on women’s use of violence in intimate relationships, impeding the development of useful empirical work, policies, and programs. Instead of making the discourse more inclusive, gender-blind

language promotes understandings of woman abuse as mutual, reciprocal, or bidirectional, recalling the days before battered women's advocates created shelters and fought for legal reforms, and scholars conducted hundreds of studies documenting battered women's experiences. Gender-blind discourse obscures the numerous well-documented sex differences in violence and abuse as well as the dearth of well-designed research on women's violence against men and same-sex violence and abuse in Canada.

Proponents of gender-blind language equate woman abuse with women's violence against men by obscuring significant sex differences in violence against intimates such as injury, outcomes, and sexual assault. The characterization of violence as sex-symmetrical is unwarranted because of the magnitude of men's violence against intimates and the gendered cultural environment that propagates violence against women and men (DeKeseredy, 2011; General Assembly, 2006).

Directions for Future Research

There is certainly a need for more research on violence and abuse in Canada. National studies specifically designed to study the nature and dynamics of abuse have been few and far between. It is imperative that future Canadian research uses best practices for studying violence and abuse to yield results that can inform effective policies and programs. Studies should include information on context, meaning, and motive so that results are interpretable. Research on violence and abuse in same-sex relationships and women's violence against male intimates should be broadly contextualized so that risks and contributing factors can be prioritized. Rather than depoliticizing violence, scholars should pay attention to the structural factors that contribute to violence so that we may address primary prevention. As Janice Ristock (2005) argued,

In focusing on the differing contexts that surround people's experiences of relationship violence we can move away from tendencies to homogenize understandings of relationship violence. Carefully examining differing contexts means recognizing the diversity of spaces in which violence occurs and the way violence is linked to hierarchies of inequality. (p. 9)

Population-specific and qualitative studies will be necessary where the numbers of survivor respondents are too small to yield good statistical data, such as with male survivors of sexual assault and abuse in same-sex couples. In addition to research on the incidence, prevalence, and dynamics of violence and abuse, antiviolence research needs to address the social context that produces high levels of violence against women and men. If we want to prevent or intervene in violence, we also need to understand the structural factors that entrap survivors in abusive relationships. More Canadian research is also needed on violence and abuse following separation (Hotton, 2001), which is a major problem for many women (DeKeseredy, 2011). Ultimately, we concur with Brownridge and colleagues (2008) that it is only by fully understanding the dynamics and contexts of violence that stakeholders will be in the most advantageous position to prevent it.

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Notes

1. See the Canadian National Survey of Woman Abuse in University/College Dating (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 1998a) and Statistics Canada's Violence Against Women Survey (H. Johnson, 1996).
2. See DeKeseredy and Schwartz (2003) for an in-depth critique of Statistics Canada's 1999 GSS.
3. See DeKeseredy and Dragiewicz (2007) for an in-depth critique of Dutton's (2006) recent work.
4. Internal citations omitted.
5. Internal citations omitted.
6. See DeKeseredy (2011) and DeKeseredy and Schwartz (1998b) for a more in-depth analysis of the strengths and limitations of the CTS and the CTS-2.
7. See Archer (2000) and Straus (2005) for reviews of major studies that support the sexual symmetry of violence thesis.
8. See Brownridge (2009) for recent Canadian empirical work on under-researched and under-served groups of women harmed by violence in intimate relationships, and Brownridge (2010) for the first Canadian study on intimate partner violence against Aboriginal men in Canada.
9. Internal citations omitted.
10. For an overview, see Kimmel (2002).
11. Internal references to tables omitted.
12. This number was followed by a warning to "use with caution," indicating that the number of men reporting this type of violence was too small to produce reliable statistics.

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Bios

Molly Dragiewicz is associate professor of criminology at the University of Ontario Institute of Technology. She is author of *Equality with a Vengeance: Men's Rights Groups, Battered Women, and Antifeminist Backlash*, and is coeditor of the *Routledge Handbook of Critical Criminology* with Walter DeKeseredy. She received the American Society of Criminology Division on Women and Crime's New Scholar Award in 2009.

Walter S. DeKeseredy is professor of criminology at the University of Ontario Institute of Technology (UOIT). He has published 16 books and more than 100 scientific journal articles and book chapters on violence against women and other social problems. In 2008, the Institute on Violence, Abuse and Trauma gave him the Linda Saltzman Memorial Intimate Partner Violence Researcher Award. He also jointly received the 2004 Distinguished Scholar Award from the American Society of Criminology's (ASC) Division on Women and Crime and the 2007 inaugural UOIT Research Excellence Award. In 1995, he received the Critical Criminologist of the Year Award from the ASC's Division on Critical Criminology (DCC) and in 2008 the DCC gave him the lifetime achievement award.