



Family Violence and Gender Fact Sheet

October 2007

One of the most hotly contested debates in the family violence research field today is the question: Is there gender symmetry in domestic violence or not? Many studies have consistently found that men are the perpetrators of abuse in the overwhelming majority of cases, and women and children are the victims.¹ Some other studies in New Zealand and internationally have shown that in the case of heterosexual couples, women are just as violent as men.^{2 3} So what explains these seemingly contradictory research findings? Are women equally as violent as men?

Gender symmetry in partner abuse

The majority of those favoring the 'gender symmetry' position base their research upon some version of the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) originally developed by Murray Straus in the 1970s and since revised by Straus and others.⁴

The CTS consists of a range of questionnaire items designed to measure different acts people use in situations of conflict within intimate relationships including reasoning, verbal aggression and physical violence. The items are ordered in terms of apparent severity⁵, the first section of the questionnaire asking about non-physically violent acts and the remainder referring to physically violent acts. The final few items make up the severe violence index and include actions such as kicking, punching or use of a weapon. Respondents are asked about how many times in the past year they and their partner have used each of the items during arguments.

Using a version of the CTS, some researchers claim that women are as violent as men. In the Christchurch Health and Development Study, researchers found that at least 90% of those respondents who reported partner violence said that they both perpetrated violence and were victims of violence.⁶ In the Dunedin Multidisciplinary Health and Development Study, 27% of women and 34% of men said they had experienced one act of physical violence from their partner in the last year.⁷ These researchers argue that partner violence is most often mutual conflict between partners.

Problems of measuring violence

The ability of the CTS scale to provide a full understanding of domestic violence has however, been questioned. The CTS provides only simple counts of violent and/or aggressive acts, over a limited period of time, and is therefore incapable of revealing ongoing systematic violence within relationships.⁸ The CTS does not gather information concerning the meaning(s) attached to the violence by either the perpetrator or victim, who initiated the violence, or what their motivation was. It also assumes that violence only happens during arguments or conflict, and so fails to capture violence that occurs at other times, especially 'control-motivated' instrumental violence and coercion by perpetrators attempting to maintain power over their victim.⁹ Reports from victims say that violence is not necessarily preceded by conflict: The violence can be unpredictable (occurring with no warning, such as when victims are sleeping), or it can be planned (not occurring with an outburst of anger).

The quantitative research methodology used in CTS research does not capture the context, meaning, motivation, and consequences of violence: Qualitative research methods are needed to fully understand the differences between men and women's violence beyond a simple count of violent acts. Furthermore, this kind of survey research is likely to underestimate men's violence towards women due to victims of severe violence refusing to participate; the exclusion of sexual violence, stalking, and violence by ex-partners;¹⁰ and due to gendered reporting bias where both men and women underestimate men's use of violence and overestimate violence by women.^{11 12 13 14}

Most critiques of the CTS then centre on its lack of attention to the context, meaning, motivation, and consequences of the violence. As a result, the measure cannot distinguish between minor, and more significant forms of violence. Minor violence covers those situations in which someone may slap or hit or throw something at their partner when angry (such as pushing someone away or slapping their hand) but such actions are episodic, do not result in significant injury, do not lead the "victim" to fear their partner, and the "perpetrator" does not gain the "victim's" compliance.

More significant is that violence, including threats of violence, which results in significant injuries, the victim fearing the perpetrator, and the perpetrator gaining control over the victim. Such physical violence is typically accompanied by a range of controlling tactics including emotional, psychological, sexual and economic abuse. This kind of violence is sometimes referred to as 'battering', or 'power and control' and is overwhelmingly committed by men.^{15 16}

Differences in violence by men and women

Research has repeatedly demonstrated that once attention to the issues of context, meaning, motivation, and consequences



of violence are included it becomes clear that there is not a gender symmetry in partner violence – it is men's violence against women and children that is the most significant social problem. For instance:

- In 2005/6 NZ Police apprehended 25,356 male family violence offenders compared to 4,135 female offenders.¹⁷
- In 2005 92% of those applying for Protection Orders were female.¹⁸
- Researchers have found that some men who have experienced abuse by their female partner find the violence humorous, suggesting that they are not afraid of the abuser,¹⁹ whereas women routinely report experiencing distress or intense fear (for themselves and their children) as a result of abuse.^{20 21}
- The psychological effects of family violence upon women and children have been found to be far more severe.²² Twice as many women as men report being significantly affected by partner violence.²³ However, in one New Zealand study both men and women reported depression and alcohol problems linked with experiencing partner abuse. It is not known to what extent the problems identified by the participants preceded the violence.²⁴
- Research suggests that most women's violence towards men is self-defensive or retaliatory,^{25, 26, 27 28} whereas much of men's violence towards women is used instrumentally to dominate and control their partner.²⁹
- Data on the incidence of violence from New Zealand National Survey of Crime Victims 2001 suggests that women face more risk of partner violence, whereas the risk of violence for men is from other men.³⁰
- In the same survey, women were more likely than men to be repeat victims of violence by current heterosexual partners.³¹
- The 2001 National Survey of Crime Victims found 14.4% of men and 21.2% of women had been hit, kicked or pushed by their heterosexual partner at least once in their life-time. However, when asked about being fearful, 8% of men, compared to 19.5% of women said they had been frightened by their partner's threats.³²
- Four and a half times more women than men reported violence in a heterosexual dating relationship and three times more women than men report violence by an ex-partner of the opposite sex.³³
- In the 2001 National Survey of Crime Victims, the gender differences were most marked for Maori – 19.6% of Maori men compared to 41.9% of Maori women reported being hit, kicked or pushed by their heterosexual partner at least once in their life-time, and 14% of Maori men compared to 39.1% of Maori women reported being frightened by threats.³⁴
- Initial data from the 2006 New Zealand Crime & Safety Survey shows a similar prevalence rate of partner violence for men and women (6% and 7%). Women however, experienced significantly more incidents of violence by partners than men, reported more 'serious' offences by partners, and sustained more injuries.³⁵
- In one of the largest studies ever to compare women and men's experience of partner violence, US researchers found that 25% of women and 8% of men reported rape or physical assault by a partner at least once in their lifetime. Violence by men was found to be the most common form – 93% of all kinds of violence experienced by adult women and 86% of all violence experienced by adult men was perpetrated by men.³⁶
- US research found that women were seven to ten times more likely to be seriously injured by partner violence than men.³⁷
- Partner violence experienced by women has been found to be closely associated with a range of negative physical and mental health effects including bruises and abrasions, fractures, internal injuries, severe menstrual problems, urinary tract infections, sexually transmitted infections (STI), non-specific pelvic pain, pelvic inflammatory disease,³⁸ along with depression and suicide attempts.³⁹
- Research conducted in Auckland and Waikato found that female victims of intimate partner violence were twice as likely as non-victims to have visited a healthcare provider during the previous month.⁴⁰
- Recent multi-country research carried out by the World Health Organization found that women internationally carried the burden of violence, suffering overwhelmingly more deaths, injuries and other negative health effects as a result of abuse by male partners.⁴¹

This evidence does not dispute the fact that some women are violent and some men are harmed by violence. Any gender symmetry in violence however, is unlikely to take fear or control issues into account, and can be said to be mostly at the lower-end of the scale of physical violence.⁴² One of the authors of the original CTS research has stated that 'it is categorically false to imply that there are the same numbers of 'battered' men as battered women'.⁴³



So what then do we know of violence committed by women?

- Men's rates of general violence consistently exceed those of women by a large margin. International research suggests this holds true across countries, across time and in relation to different forms of violence. Despite the differential rates of reporting and recording violence in different countries and sectors of society, most reported violence is perpetrated by men. The only exceptions to this are closer parity (though not equality) between African American men and women, and child abuse in the home.⁴⁴
- Waikato research indicates that women kill their intimate partners out of fear of death or injury, whereas men kill their partners to control or punish.⁴⁵ This finding is backed up by international data prompting leading researchers to make the following statement:

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 although their mates are 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-defence.⁴⁶
- The authors of an international literature review concluded that women committed far less violent crime than men, that violent offending constituted only a small percentage of women's offending, and that the types of offences committed by women tended to be less serious than those committed by men.⁴⁷
- A New Zealand review of all child homicides between 1991 and 2000 found that in cases where a child was killed by their parent - 54% of perpetrators were fathers, 40% were mothers, and 6% of cases involved both parents. When children were killed by other people, men were the perpetrators in 78% of cases, women in 20%. The researcher commented that these figures were similar to international findings.⁴⁸
- Another study of New Zealand child homicides looked at a non random sample of cases between 1980 and 2003 and found that equal numbers of women and men killed children. The majority of children killed by women were under 2 years old. Unlike men, women did not kill several children together, nor did they kill adults at the same time as children.⁴⁹
- Women remain overwhelmingly responsible for child care, offering a potential answer to why they figure prominently in child abuse statistics. However, one international researcher's findings led her to note that 'given that men spend on the whole so much less time with children than women, what is remarkable is not that women are violent towards children but that men are responsible for nearly half of the child abuse'.⁵⁰
- International research suggests that both rates and types of intimate partner violence between same sex partners – gay and lesbian – are similar to that found in heterosexual relationships.⁵¹

Clearly, the relationship between gender and violence is complex. Developing a full understanding of family violence also requires taking into account other aspects of people's lives, such as sexuality, culture, class, ethnicity, age, ability, and so on.⁵² Additionally, the specific social and interpersonal contexts of an individual's life will have an inevitable influence upon both the use and consequence of violence. While gender does not explain everything about violence, attempts to understand and respond to family violence are likely to be incomplete without including a gender analysis.

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- 5 It is only apparent severity, because the severity of the violence requires a consideration not just of the action (a push or a punch for example) but of the consequence: A push might be just be moving someone aside, or it could be a push at the top of a flight of stairs that results in a fall that breaks a person's arm.
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