Chapter 9

Domestic Abuse: Analysing Women's Use of Violence

Leticia Couto

Abstract

Now and again the discourse of women's violence being ignored and minimised emerges, but what is already known about this subject? Within the domestic abuse literature, there appears to be a weighty discord between Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) and family conflict researchers. Both groups present very distinct findings regarding the motives and prevalence of women's use of violence. This theoretical chapter aims to provide an historical and contemporary grounded overview of how women's use of violence in domestic abuse incidents has been depicted in the literature within these two groups of researchers (VAWG and family conflict). This analysis will be especially focussed on the underlying rationale behind women's violence and its prevalence and impact.

Keywords: Domestic abuse; women's violence; male victims; intimate terrorism; IPV; CTS

Introduction

When domestic abuse first attracted academics' attention, women were generally understood as being at the belly of the beast that is domestic abuse. In this metaphor, men were the predators, and women their prey. Later, this story began to be retold in a drastically different way by family conflict studies, confounding what we thought to be already consistently established roles of villain and victim (Machado, 2020). In this new scenario the results from family conflict surveys, such as the National Family Violence Survey and the National Survey of Families and Households, indicated that both men and women appeared to be equally likely to be the perpetrators, i.e. the initiators of violence. The issue is that criminal justice statistics and narrative accounts from advocates and domestic abuse victims in clinics and domestic abuse shelters do not support the latter

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narrative. How can we explain this? Is it possible that women have been able to cunningly enshroud most of their abuse until now? Or are there other forces at play?

The pivotal question to be answered is not going to be whether women perpetrate domestic abuse or not. We know they do; otherwise, there would not be any domestic abuse within same-sex female relationships.[1] What will be addressed in this chapter is how the apparently contradictory results arising from Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) (i.e. feminist researchers) and family conflict studies on women's perpetration rates of domestic abuse can be understood. More specifically this chapter aims to answer the question of whether domestic abuse is a gendered issue, i.e. if it tends to flow in a specific direction in heterosexual relationships, and if there are differences in the abuse perpetrated by women.

The Differences Between VAWG and Family Conflict Studies

The journey into the concealed dynamics of domestic abuse started with feminist research, which uncovered and documented the experiences of women as victims of violent men, bringing to light the nature and extent of the abuse that happened behind the closed doors and hidden corners of their homes (Naffine, 1997). VAWG researchers not only told women's stories of abuse, making their voices heard, but also established the asymmetrical nature of domestic abuse (i.e. primarily perpetrated by men) (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002). Men's violence against women in general began to be identified as a structural problem and explained within a dynamic of power and control. The analysis into how men's dominance over women has been configured through traditional gender roles and behavioural patterns revealed a tale of ceaseless power imbalance.[2] A tale that seems to continue to this day, as masculinity still tends to be associated with being powerful and in control, including over others (Maricourt & Burrell, 2021).

However, results from family conflict studies brought forth surprising results. They showed that the prevalence rates of women and men reporting intimate partner violence (IPV) were similar. Since then, more than 200 studies have found similar findings (Straus, 2015). Family conflict studies tend to conclude not only that IPV is perpetrated equally by men and women but also that there are high rates of IPV with low rates of injury (Kimmel, 2002). Family conflict studies (see, for example, Fiebert, 1998) concluded that women who were previously seen as the primary victims of domestic abuse were in fact as likely as men to initiate and perpetrate said abuse. Within this theoretical framework, which started to be developed by Gelles and Straus in 1979, domestic abuse was not found to be a gendered issue, but rather there was symmetry in how the violence flowed between men and women. The use of violence was understood to be a reciprocal issue coming from identical motivations.

The family conflict findings are thus at odds with those from VAWG research, which have consistently shown that women are overwhelmingly the victims and men the perpetrators (Myhill, 2015). As argued by Kimmel (2002), part of what has caused such distinct stances comes from what is actually being measured or

analysed. VAWG studies are usually based on qualitative data gleaned from police data and medical sources as well as narrative accounts with advocates and domestic abuse victims within a clinical, criminal justice or shelter setting. There are also large-scale studies, using crime victimisation surveys, that have found similar findings corroborating the gendered nature of domestic abuse (see, for example, Myhill, 2015). On the other hand, family conflict studies focus on the use of aggression within relationships and tend to use small convenience samples with college students, in which most participants may or may not be cohabitating with their partners (e.g. Archer, 1999; Straus, 2015). These studies also tend to use statistically valid measurement tools that do not adequately capture the context, meaning and impact of the abuse, such as the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS).

Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS)

Both the CTS and its subsequent version, the CTS2, have an act-based approach, as they ask participants if they, as well as their partner, have engaged in a number of behaviours throughout the last 12 months, and if so, how often.[3] The inclusion of questions both about victimisation and perpetration has the purpose of gathering information about the prevalence of what Straus (2015) called Dyadic Concordance Types (if the abusive behaviour was bi-directional or perpetrated only by females or males).

The concerns about this scale are not related to its reliability, as results tend to be consistent within different studies using the CTS, but rather its face and content validity (i.e. if it measures what it is supposed to as well as to which extent it encompasses the entire construct that it is examining, respectively) (Chapman & Gillespie, 2019). In fact, the main criticism towards this scale is that it only determines if those behaviours happened, without having any consideration for their context. The issue with this is that context is especially important when it comes to domestic abuse. Questions such as what the motivation for the behaviour was, as well as who initiated the violence, are paramount to understanding abuse dynamics. Without accounting for context, we cannot determine if an action is malicious or benign, and even when the aggression is bidirectional there still may be an aggressor and a victim (Margolin, 1987).

However, Straus (2012) argues that the CTS's ability to measure acts and not context is misguided criticism, as the current approach of measuring blows is crucial for its validity. He further explains that:

> The belief that the CTS is not valid because it provides only a simple count of assaultive acts is analogous to believing that a spelling test is invalid because it provides only a simple count of how many words the child can spell and does not include context and consequence data on why a child spells poorly (such as limited exposure to books at home or test anxiety), and does not provide

> information on the harmful effects of spelling difficulty (such as low self-esteem or dropping out of school).
>
> (Straus, 2012, p. 541)

The fallacy of Straus' argument lies in the evaluation of when context is important. In a spelling test, it is not important for the grader to know why a pupil is performing well or not; it may be important in a follow-up evaluation to get a broad picture of how teacher and pupil can do better, but not for the grade itself. The same does not happen in the case of violence. Context, in particular the motivations and consequences of violent behaviour, are a key element of the criminal justice process. These conditions are what define which crime has been committed, if any. More importantly, we would not know how to develop policies and allocate funds to combat violence without contextual information.

Dobash and Dobash (2004) described an illustrative example of the disparate answers that can be elicited when considering behaviours bereft of context. The first version of the CTS asked participants if they had ever thrown an object at their partner or had hit/tried to hit their partner with something. Firstly, hitting and trying to hit are measured as having the same severity. The second issue is related to the types of objects being discussed, and the intention behind throwing said objects. For instance, throwing crockery at one's partner to try to hit them out of anger is very different than a playful throw of a pillow; however, both behaviours could prompt an affirmative answer to this item.

In 2012, Straus answered by arguing that this example is misleading and outdated as that item of CTS had been updated in 1985 to include 'something that could hurt'. However, the issue is that the initial version of this scale continued to be applied until much later. In fact, Straus (2012) mentions a study in the same article where this argument is made, in which the authors (Lorber & O'Leary, 2012) use the initial, 1979 version of the CTS with the item 'throwing something at the partner'. Other relevant examples of mismatches when context is considered between what the scale is supposed to measure and what it actually measures can be found, for example, in Margolin (1987) and Nazroo (1995).

Straus (2012) has argued that measuring context alongside behaviour makes assumptions about a relationship. But if we do not have this information, are we not making assumptions as well? Obviously, including all potential contexts in the CTS is not feasible, but that does not mean that not having them is not a substantial limitation. Even those studies that include other measures besides the CTS to try to analyse the motives for violence appear to fall somewhat short of what they have set out to achieve.[4] For example, the scales that include questions about who initiated the violence and why tend to include motives such as power/control, self-defense, anger, communication difficulties, retaliation, jealousy and others. The issue is that we have once again stumbled upon the same problem – these categories are highly dependent on how the respondent interprets their own violence (Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 2012). Olson and Lloyd (2005), for example, found that whilst women reported initiating aggression in most conflicts described (54%), the definition of what each person understood as initiating the conflict varied significantly. For some, initiating could involve being angry,

bringing up the conflict issue or persistently asking or wanting to discuss something the other partner would prefer not to. Initiating conflict, in these cases, was not perceived as striking the first blow. It seems that wording the questions about who initiated the aggression in a simple yes/no format not only undermines the complexity of the issue, but it has also led to the conclusion that women initiate aggression as often as men.

This scale also suffers from the same limitations as other quantitative self-report measures – it assumes that those surveyed provide reliable/accurate accounts about their partners as well as their own violence (Dobash & Dobash, 2004). The validity of the CTS is therefore further undermined by memory and response biases, i.e. correctly recalling what happened and answering truthfully (Chapman & Gillespie, 2019). Obviously, this can be particularly problematic when we consider the manipulative nature of domestic abuse perpetrators. For example, Anderson and Umberson (2001, p. 362), conducted in-depth interviews with 33 male perpetrators convicted of domestic abuse and found that the respondents interpreted violent conflicts in ways that suggested that their female partners were the main perpetrators, whilst also justifying and minimising their own violence. To further aggravate this issue, women tend to overreport the violence they perpetrate in comparison with their male partners (Margolin, 1987), have a proclivity to accept blame for their partners' aggression (Olson & Lloyd, 2005) as well as underreport the number of injuries they have received from their partners in comparison with men's self-reports (Bélanger et al., 2013). A possible solution to ameliorate this issue would be to have data from both partners in the relationship alongside qualitative explanations; however, this approach is rarely used.

Not considering consequences, intentions and sequence of events is an abstract academic exercise, utterly disconnected with how we experience and attribute meaning to violence (Hill, 2020). Not addressing the contextual aspects of violence means that the subtler patterns of coercive control will not be measured in these surveys adequately enough (Myhill, 2015). The CTS (and its subsequent version) is very useful to analyse overall amounts of aggressive behaviours and the ways that people might express anger, frustration and loss of control. However, it does not include any way to evaluate control tactics or the impact and terror that may come from the abuse (Kimmel, 2002).

Understanding Conflicting Results

Despite the limitations of the CTS, we have yet to explain women's rates of aggression in family conflict studies, especially the more methodologically robust ones – with representative samples and other diagnostic criteria (for example, by including measures of injuries and other impacts following the abuse). In 1995, Johnson had an important breakthrough that combined the contradictory results coming from VAWG and family conflict studies. Johnson realised that feminist research (VAWG) and family conflict studies were not at odds with each other, they were simply analysing two distinctly different phenomena.

On one hand, we have the situational/common couple violence research, which has also been denominated as marital or family violence/conflict. All these terms, framed within conflicts theory, describe the possible escalation of arguments and conflicts to some form of violence between couples (Fagerlund, 2021). In fact, the CTS and CTS2 both start by implying that conflicts emerge as a result of an argument, which has more to do with being tired and in a bad mood than an effort to control or abuse another (Kimmel, 2002). In other words, participants might not even consider the aggression as abusive. Both men and women appear to engage in this type of occasional mutual aggression at equal rates, especially in younger samples.

On the other hand, we have what Johnson (1995) called patriarchal terrorism, which later became known as intimate terrorism or coercive control. This form of IPV is what is usually thought of as being domestic abuse. It represents the deleterious constellations of abuse, usually perpetrated by men against women, within a pattern of violent coercion and control (Stark, 2007).[5]

The issue is that both groups are not only examining what appears to be the same thing, i.e. violence between couples, but they also tend to use the same terminology (IPV or domestic abuse), despite ascribing it very different meanings (Winstok, 2013). In the same way that stick bugs may be camouflaged to look like a stick, share part of the name, but are inherently different from sticks, these two definitions should also be carefully differentiated. Intimate terrorism is not about someone losing their temper, and it does not occur because of a fight. It is based on threads of power and control, in which conflict is manufactured through subtle patterns of cruelty (Hill, 2020, p. 187). Intimate terrorism is therefore divergent to its core from unhealthy ways of dealing with conflicts.

It is necessary to go to this level of detail because this is what explains the seemingly contradictory results between both frameworks. Strauss and situational couple violence researchers have been treating the difference between intimate terrorism and situational couple violence as mostly semantic and unimportant, but this does not seem to be the case (Myhill, 2015). For example, Straus (2012) argues that the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) is inadequate for measuring IPV as the percentages found by the CTS are 10–30 times higher compared with the ones found in the NCVS. However, the results obtained by the CTS are only backed up by other studies using the same scale. When we consider police statistics, legal records, primary healthcare settings, case studies and other in-depth analysis, the results between these studies and those that use the CTS are drastically different, but similar to those of the NCVS (Sita & Dear, 2021). The difference between the results arising from the CTS and the results from multiple other sources corroborates Johnson's theory that different concepts are being measured. Many studies were also further conducted to validate Johnson's theory (see, for example, Myhill, 2015).

Additionally, when studies compare the use of violence within couples without resorting to the CTS, they evidence the asymmetrical nature of intimate terrorism. For example, Dobash and Dobash (2004) analysed – both quantitatively and qualitatively – 95 heterosexual couples that were part of a larger study of criminal justice intervention in IPV. The authors asked them separately to discuss both

their own and their partner's use of violence and found that the violence perpetrated by women was different in terms of frequency and severity. However, they also found that some of the women did at times resort to reactive anger after a single incident or as a result of the cumulative effect of many attacks over a prolonged period of time. The question here is if we can consider this to be violence used in self-defense. In these cases, the concepts of fighting back and self-defense can become somewhat blurred. Reactive violence or what Johnson (2010) called violent resistance can provide a better description of the situation.

The use of self-defensive and retaliatory violence is one of the biggest differences between male and female violence (Boxall et al., 2020), as found, for example in Swan et al. (2012). This is not to say that the use of self-defense is the only reason why women may use violence. Women have been found to use aggression in intimate relationships for many reasons that go beyond self-defense. For example, to show their anger/frustration/jealousy, regain control in the relationship, release tension, display coercive control, stand up for themselves, protect their children, seek revenge/punishment for their partners' misconduct and/or mistreatment and get the partner to engage emotionally or get them to communicate (Larance et al., 2019; Olson & Lloyd, 2005). Larance and Miller (2017) have also found that some women use violence in anticipation of further violence, i.e. as a result of historical substantial harm from their current and/or past partner, women may use force when they interpret a particular behaviour, tone or action as triggering.

Heterosexual Male Victims

All of what has been discussed is not to say that women cannot perpetrate abuse or even intimate terrorism. However, they are far more likely to use violence within a context of violent resistance, as evidenced by Saunders (1986) and Margolin (1987), than to be the primary perpetrators. The small proportion of males who have experienced intimate terrorism also corroborates this argument. For example, when Hester et al. (2017) analysed the prevalence of intimate terrorism with men as victims they found that only 4.4% of the entire sample of 707 men could be considered victims of intimate terrorism. Almost half of those reported using abusive behaviours against their female partners as well. The men who reported experiencing without resorting to violence constituted 2.3% of the total sample.

Gadd et al. (2002) also conducted an in-depth analysis of 30 disclosures of abuse out of a sample of 90 males who identified as victims of domestic abuse in the 2000 Scottish Crime Survey. The results indicated that some of them misinterpreted the domestic abuse questions; the others were found to be, in comparison to female victims of domestic abuse, less likely to have been repeat victims of assault, to have been seriously injured or feeling fearful.[6] As the authors noted, many male victims described their partner's abuse as relatively rare and inconsequential (also found in the study of Dim, 2021). Additionally, some male victims proved to also be assailants.

The study of Peraica et al. (2021) provided similar findings. Although the authors positioned themselves within a non-gendered based paradigm (believing that the abuse would be the same for men and women) their results revealed otherwise. The authors found that there was a higher and statistically significant rate of physical, financial and multiple-type abuse perpetrated against women, and those were experienced for longer periods of time before seeking help.[7] Moreover, in the case of male victims, they tended to experience more psychological violence and their abusers tended to be their parents.

Impact of the Abuse

Although women are disproportionately impacted by IPV, including the most harmful forms, when men are victimised, they may attribute a different meaning to the violence and respond differently to it. The gendered connotation and associated vulnerability of the victim identity may influence whether men recognise themselves as a victim of domestic abuse. Moreover, when they do identify as victims, some may experience added layers of hardship if trying to seek help, such as fear of gender-biased ridicule or of being labelled as the abuser (Scott-Storey et al., 2022).

There seems to be a shared agreement in the literature regarding the consequences of abuse – they can be devastating for both men and women, but there are also important differences. Whereas both can equally experience depression, anxiety, feelings of worthlessness, suicidal ideation as well as impaired sleep (found in the study of Sita & Dear, 2021), women tend to suffer more severe consequences and feel a debilitating and overwhelming fear for their lives that is not experienced by male victims (as found in Dziewa & Glowacz, 2021).

While women can and do engage in controlling behaviours, it is far harder for them to achieve the kind of dominance associated with coercive control (Myhill, 2015). As explained by Scott-Storey et al. (2022), while men may feel controlled by their female partner, it tends to be a control exerted through children (e.g. fear of losing custody), being monitored/controlled and manipulative behaviours instead of being controlled by means of physical aggression. Traditional gender roles and the physical differential advantage between men and women makes it exceptionally difficult for women to achieve the same level of threat and control that characterises intimate partner terrorism over their male partners (Myhill, 2015).

It also appears that men can fear their female partner's use of violence, instead of the partner themselves, as observed in the study of Dim (2021). When participants expressed feeling fearful, it was a fear related to being injured, coupled with the worry of hurting the female partner and/or being arrested due to possible false allegations, as opposed to a fear of the partner per se. For example, in the study of Hester et al. (2017) the male victims did not report experiencing the same fear and danger of coercive controlling violence experienced by women. Additionally, Sita and Dear (2021) selected four heterosexual male victims of intimate terrorism, complementing the data with collateral information from friends and

family members of the participants to corroborate their statements.[8] The authors found that the participants' experiences were comparable to those of female victims except for the fear component, as they did not display the immobilising fear and entrapment that many female victims experience. Their fear mainly stemmed from what the abusive partner could do to their lives, such as restricting access to their children or damaging their reputation.

These differences are not surprising when we consider the statistics related to intimate partner homicides. For example, Stöck et al. (2013, p. 863) found that when women are murdered, intimate partners have the highest probability of being the perpetrators. The proportion of murdered women killed by a partner is six times higher than the proportion of murdered men killed by a partner (38.6% and 6.3% of female and male homicides, respectively). Additionally, when women do kill their partners, it is frequently because they were subjected to horrendous abuse and felt trapped, with no way out (as found in Scott et al., 2022).

This key difference in the fear experienced may indicate that control presents differently for male victims. This finding can have important implications for the services offered to them – for example, if this is the case, the offer of logistical support for leaving the relationship would be more appropriate than emergency services (Sita & Dear, 2021). The need for this type of support also seems to be supported in the literature. For instance, Burrell and Westmarland (2019) found that male victims wanted someone who would listen to them in a compassionate and non-judgemental way as well as more specific practical and legal advice.

Given that the literature does not always consider controlling behaviours and coercive control as distinct (although they are closely interlinked), the question that remains unanswered is if it is possible to apply the coercive control label to the extreme versions of female-to-male abuse if men do not experience the same fear.

Summary

The debate surrounding gender symmetry appears to have been misguided from the start, as it failed to acknowledge gender differences related to gender identities, power differentials, resources, physical strength, injuries, consequences and context (Olson & Lloyd, 2005). Analysing women's use of violence through summed up acontextual checklists will continue to contribute to an inaccurate and misleading picture (Larance & Miller, 2017). As argued by Kimmel (2002) the family conflict findings need to be understood within a broader context – these studies fail to address why women would hit men inside the house at similar rates as men, but almost never commit violence towards men or women outside the home; outside the family context.

In this chapter we reviewed the complex nature of gendered domestic abuse, covering the theoretical and methodological differences between VAWG and family conflict research. This chapter has attempted to clarify the reasons behind the variability in the prevalence of women's use of violence owing to different theoretical frameworks. Domestic abuse can mean many things. Within intimate

relations it can go from a continuum of coercive control at one end, and one off-events at the other (Hester et al., 2017). This means that what appears to be the same concept – IPV – has been conceptualised very differently by two different groups of researchers, resulting in disparate findings. What evidence consistently indicates is that what is generally thought of as being domestic abuse, and which later became known as intimate terrorism or coercive control, is mainly perpetrated by men towards women. Even in those few cases where male heterosexual victims fit the description of intimate terrorism, there are key differences between male and female victims. This means that perhaps a new concept that more accurately describes the experiences of male victims should be proffered and the support offered should be tailored to their needs instead a one-size-fits-all approach (Miller, 2005).

Further, greater care should be placed on defining what is being studied, including the context in which violence and abuse occur. More importantly, women's use of violence should not be relegated to a footnote or claims that women are not abusive. Such notions would leave a vacuum that has been until now filled with disinformation and adversarial discourses, for example, by extremist men's rights groups (Hill, 2020, p. 204) as well as the media.

Notes

1. See, for example, Machado (2020).
2. A combination which Connell and Messerschmidt (2005, p. 832) defined as hegemonic masculinity.
3. See Straus et al. (1996) for the specific changes.
4. See, for example, Harned (2001).
5. For example, in the study of Barlow and Walklate (2021) using police data, 95% of the victims of coercive control were women and 93% of perpetrators men.
6. The misinterpretations were related to what constitutes domestic abuse. The same happened in the study of Burrell and Westmarland (2019) in which a male participant described his partner not wanting to have sex with him and not being emotionally supportive as abuse.
7. In line with previous studies, this indicates that women tend to suffer years of abuse before seeking help. Shame and embarrassment are commonly mentioned as barriers for male victims to seek help and/or report the abuse perpetrated by their female partners, but these difficulties are shared by all victims of domestic abuse irrespectively of gender. This has also been corroborated by Peraica et al. (2021), in which male and female victims did not reveal any difference in reporting the abuse to social welfare centres. However, there are also studies that have established the increased barriers to help seeking male domestic abuse victims may experience.
8. The authors do not mention from how many participants this sample was selected.

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