



Women who perpetrate intimate partner violence: A review of the literature with recommendations for treatment

Michelle Carney ^{a,*}, Fred Buttell ^b, Don Dutton ^c

^a School of Social Work, Tucker Hall, University of Georgia, Athens, GA 30602, USA

^b Tulane University, USA

^c University of British Columbia, Canada

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to review the literature on women as perpetrators of violence in their intimate relationships (i.e., domestically violent women) and summarize the scant literature on intervention programs for these women. Particular attention is paid to the cultural influences that shape our conceptualization of “domestic violence” and the fact that empirical research suggests that domestic violence has been falsely framed as exclusively male initiated violence. The article concludes with a discussion of the similarities and differences between male and female domestic violence offenders and identifies areas where treatment for female offenders might be improved.

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Among the debates in the field of domestic violence, none is more acrimonious than the debate around female initiated violence — a debate that has been troubling for feminists since the first U.S. National Family Violence Survey of 1975 found women to be as violent as men. Because this finding contradicts feminist theory, it has been suppressed, unreported, reinterpreted, or denied. Attempts to explain away or diminish female initiated violence in intimate

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: mmcarney@uga.edu (M. Carney).

relationships has resulted in violent women being portrayed as engaging in self-defensive violence, less serious violence, or being the victims of gender biased reporting differences (i.e., women are more credible in their reports of violence). In fact, rates of female initiated violence in intimate relationships are equivalent to or exceed male rates; they include female violence against non-violent males, even when analyzed for level of severity (Stets & Straus, 1992) and they have serious consequences for males (Archer, 2000; Laroche, 2005; Stets & Straus, 1992). Currently, women offenders constitute the fastest growing segment of the criminal justice system and the National Institute of Justice estimates that the increase in the incarceration rate for women is double that of men (Ferraro & Moe, 2003; Mullings, Hartley, & Marquart, 2004).

1. The research: is domestic violence invariably male initiated?

Although the prevalence and consequences of male violence directed towards women in intimate relationships has been well established [for a recent review, see Lawson (2003)], the research on violent women in intimate relationships is far less developed. The primary reason for this situation is the highly charged and frequently acrimonious debate about whether “husband battering” actually exists (Pagelow, 1992). The crux of the debate hinges on the data generated from two, mutually exclusive, data sets. Data from nationally representative surveys suggest that men and women are equally violent in intimate relationships (Straus, 1999), a conclusion borne out by Archer’s (2000, 2002) meta-analysis of 82 couple-conflict studies which found that women were more likely to use physical aggression than men and to resort to violence more often than men. These data are directly contrasted by data generated from the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) that has consistently indicated that women are five times more likely than men to have been the victims of domestic violence (Rennison & Welchans, 2000). These different data sets have led to diametrically opposed conceptualizations of domestic violence, which, in turn, has led to the intense debate just discussed and shifted attention away from female initiated violence, rather than on the growing body of evidence to support the existence of “husband battering” and, more broadly, female initiated violence in intimate relationships.

Unfortunately, this polarization of the domestic violence issue persists, despite recent attempts to combat this belief system with empirical evidence. For example, a recent study found that men are more likely than women to suffer serious injuries in intimate partner relationships and that men are actually less likely than women to use violence in intimate relationships (Felson & Cares, 2005). Some factors are apparently inhibiting men, who are generally much more violent than women (outside intimate relationships), from using violence against their female partners. Results in the Felson and Cares (2005) study show that those men who do engage in violence against their spouse and those women who engage in violence against their family members are more likely than other offenders to do so with high frequency. It is surprising that this result was obtained in what was essentially presented to respondents as, “a study of violence against women” (Felson & Cares, 2005, p. 15). In fact, the authors argue that men actually inhibit violence in intimate relationships compared to their non-intimate levels.

On a larger scale, the reanalysis of the Canadian GSS data by Laroche (2005), based on a sample of 25,876, also strongly refutes the idea that males do not suffer ill effects from intimate partner violence. It is of interest that, though not all “victim” data in that survey were available for men, what was available indicated great similarity in male and female victimization. Laroche (2005) reports that 83% of men who “feared for their life” did so because they were unilaterally terrorized by their female partner compared to the 77% of women who were unilaterally terrorized. Of the terrorized men, 80% reported having their everyday activities disrupted (compared to 74% for terrorized women), 84% received medical care (the same rate as for terrorized women), and 62% sought psychological counseling (63% for women). Hence, in a nationally representative and huge sample, victim reactions for abused men were virtually identical to those of abused women. It seems that earlier research was driven by a paradigm that avoided asking the right questions of men.

When domestic violence questions are reframed in gender neutral terms, the results are surprising. For example, an emergency clinic in Philadelphia found that 12.6% of all male patients over a thirteen-week period ($N=866$) were victims of domestic violence. These patients reported having been kicked, bitten, punched, or choked by female intimate partners in 47% of cases, and in 37% of cases reported a weapon being used against them (Mechem, Shofer, Reinhard, Hornig, & Datner, 1999). The authors of this study observed that the numbers would have been higher except they had to stop counting after midnight and screened out “major trauma” cases, which could have upped the proportion injured by female partners. Importantly, to this day, many emergency clinics ask women but not men about potential domestic violence origins for injuries.

In a similar study involving an emergency clinic in Ohio, it was discovered that 72% of men admitted with injuries from spousal violence had been stabbed (Vasquez & Falcone, 1997). The most frequent cause of admission for women victims was assault (53%). The authors report that burns obtained in intimate violence were as frequent for male victims as for female victims. As this study demonstrates, community samples, unless they require subjects to self-report as crime victims, show a different and more equivalent pattern of violence by gender than that alleged by the radical feminist perspective.

Finally, men have rarely had their fear of female violence assessed (the LaRoche analysis of the Canadian National GSS data is one exception). A study by Hines, Brown, and Dunning (2003) examined calls from men to the American national domestic violence helpline for men. As the authors pointed out, it would be unlikely for male perpetrators or co-perpetrators to use this line. When the line opened, it received one call a day. When it was advertised in state telephone directories, it began to receive 250 calls a day. Given that 2.6 million US men are victims of severe violence, further usage increase is expected (Straus & Gelles, 1992). All but a few callers experienced physical abuse from their female partners (only 4% were gay), and a substantial minority feared their partners' violence and were stalked. Over 90% experienced controlling behaviors, and several men reported frustrating experiences with the domestic violence system; 52.4% of males who were currently in an abusive relationship indicated that they were fearful that their female partners would cause a serious injury if she found out that they had called the helpline. Hines et al. (2003) state that "according to qualitative accounts, several physical attacks were reported to have occurred to the groin area." (p. 17). Callers also reported forms of violence that are not measured in surveys, such as having their partner try to drive over them with a car. Twenty-nine percent reported being stalked by their female partners.

Interestingly, authors responding to findings that suggest a narrow or non-existent gender gap in partner abuse rates also allege that females are universally more vulnerable to abuse by men than men are to abuse by women. Importantly, this perspective has found little support in the data. Several studies indicate male victims are as likely as, or significantly more likely than, female victims to experience assaults involving the use of weapons (Brown, 2004; Buzawa & Buzawa, 1990; Hines et al., 2003). George (1999) separated kicking and punching in his nationally representative sample and recommended what might be an important methodological improvement. Since women have less upper body strength than men, they may be more likely to use their legs than their arms during an altercation (Basile, 2004).

In terms of evaluating the empirical literature on the perpetration of violence in intimate relationships, regardless of the variation in the studies, two conclusions seem reasonable: (1) women are injured more than men but (2) men are injured as well and are not immune to being seriously injured. Simply because the injury rates are lower, men should not be denied protection. Relatedly, the argument is sometimes made that men use threats more frequently than women, but Straus, Hamby, Bone-McCoy, and Sugarman (1996) found that women reported using somewhat more psychological aggression than did men. The "threatened to hit or throw something at partner" item correlated .52 with this scale, of which it is a part. Also, Giordano, Millhoin, Cernokovich, Pugh, and Rudolph (1999), in a study of 721 young adults, found that women were more likely than men to threaten to use a knife or gun.

Recently, Williams and Frieze (2005) analyzed the National Comorbidity Survey data. They reported several different violence patterns (as did Stets & Straus, 1992) based on a sample of 3519, concluding that the most common was "mutual and mild violence" followed by "mutual severe violence." In terms of reactions to the violence, the similarities by gender outweighed the differences. More women than men reported perpetrating violence, and slightly more men than women reported being the victim of severe violence. The authors conclude that this "may challenge assumptions about women's victimization in relationships" (Williams & Frieze, 2005, p.781). Strengthening the conclusions that emerge from a consideration of the survey data, the results of longitudinal developmental studies of men and women, all based on large community samples generate a common conclusion; that female violence is common, occurs at about the same rate as male violence and is generated independently of the actions of the "current boyfriend" or husband. Perhaps most importantly, the violence that is identified in these studies has a long developmental history, preceding the current adult relationship, so it cannot be dismissed as self-defense. When violence does occur, the most common form is mutual, followed by female more severe, followed by male more severe. As Moffitt, Caspi, Rutter, and Silva (2001) put it "the argument that women's abuse perpetration in the community is too trivial to research could prove to be tantamount to arguing that smoking in the community is too trivial to research and scientists should focus on cases of lung cancer" (Moffitt et al., 2001, p.69).

New data from dating violence studies are remarkably consistent with the adult partner abuse literature. The largest and most comprehensive of all dating violence studies was a cross-cultural study of partner violence in a sample of 6900 university students from seventeen nations by Douglas and Straus (2003). They found adolescent girls were 115%

more likely to assault male partners than adolescent boys were to assault female partners, regardless of whether overall assault or severe assault rates were considered. Similarly, [Watson, Cascardi, Avery-Leaf, and O'Leary \(2001\)](#) sampled 475 high school students (266 males and 209 females) from a large, metropolitan area on Long Island and found female students were significantly more likely than male students to report an aggressive response.

Studies of undergraduate college students found that men sustained higher levels of moderate violence than women with severe violence being rare for both women and men ([Katz, Kuffel, & Coblenz, 2002](#)) and 29% of males and 35% of females reported perpetrating physical aggression; 12.5% of the males and 4.5% of the females reported receiving severe physical aggression; 14% of females reported that they were the sole perpetrators of aggression — injuries were sustained by 8.4% of males and 5% of females ([Hines & Saudino, 2002](#)). These rates, which suggest gender symmetry in the perpetration of relationship violence, are not unique and [Fiebert \(2004\)](#) has amassed a bibliography of 159 peer-reviewed publications finding equal or greater aggression by females than males. The total collected sample is greater than 109,000. An earlier version was published in 1997 ([Fiebert, 1997](#)).

In sum, across several large sample studies, with varying demographic compositions, dating violence is more likely perpetrated by female than male youths. The literature reviewed above demonstrates that this abuse results in injuries in an important minority of young men and women and further supports the original findings of [Stets and Straus \(1992\)](#) obtained from the 1985 US National Family Violence Survey. These findings clearly run counter to the common assertion that female aggression in intimate relationships is uncommon and inconsequential.

2. Cultural beliefs shaping both our conceptualization of “domestic violence” and formal responses to address it

Despite the picture of domestic violence perpetration that emerges from the empirical literature, male victimization is not taken seriously, in part because of the “gender paradigm” described above and, in part, because of a cultural belief that men should be able to defend themselves or a disbelief in female violence. For example, the item “burned him with something” ([Marshall, 1992, p. 200](#)) is rated less serious by males (.83 where the upper limit is 1.0), than the item “burned her with something” ([Marshall, 1992, p.117](#)) is rated by females (.96). Law enforcement is lax when men are injured in domestic violence disputes ([Brown, 2004; Buzawa & Buzawa, 1990](#)). When Dwayne Bobbit had his penis cut off by his wife in 1993, it became material for late night comedy routines, and his wife was found not guilty by reason of temporary insanity. This reaction would have been unthinkable with the genders reversed.

[Buzawa, Austin, Bannon, and Jackson \(1992\)](#), in a study of the police arrest policy in Detroit, found that “male victims reported three times the rate of serious injury as their female counterparts, 38% compared to 14%” (p. 263). However, the police rarely arrested a female perpetrator. As [Buzawa et al. \(1992\)](#) put it: “Not one male victim was pleased with the police response. They stated that their preferences were not respected by the officers, nor was their victimization taken seriously. The lack of police responsiveness occurred regardless of the degree of injury. For example, one male reported requiring hospitalization for being stabbed in the back, with a wound that just missed puncturing his lungs. Despite his request to have the offending woman removed (not even arrested), the officers simply called an ambulance and refused formal sanctions against the woman, including her removal. Indeed, all the men interviewed reported that the incident was trivialized and that they were belittled by the officers” ([Buzawa et al., 1992, p.265](#)).

[Brown \(2004\)](#) studied differences in responses by the criminal justice system to assaults committed by males and females equated for severity. In cases where only the male partner was injured, the female was charged in 60.2% of the cases, however, when the female partner was injured, the male was charged 91.1% of the time. In no-injury cases, the male was charged 52.5% of the time, the female 13.2% of the time. [Brown \(2004\)](#) also found that women were more likely to have used weapons and caused injuries and also to have received more serious charges (more than twice as likely to be charged with aggravated assault or assault with a weapon), and that those who were prosecuted tended to have inflicted higher levels of injury against their victim than prosecuted men and, as with arrested women, were more likely than men to have used weapons. In severe injury cases, 71.4% of men and 22.2% of women were found guilty. The low percentage of women found guilty was due to “witness problems” (few men being willing to testify). More than half the male victims refused to testify, and female perpetrators of severe injuries had charges withdrawn 77.8% of the time. This pattern was reversed for woman victims; the more seriously injured, the more likely they were to testify. [Brown \(2004\)](#) commented that “All of the evidence indicates that abused men fit the theory of the “battered woman” better than abused women do” (p. 65).

In a similar study, [Henning and Renauer \(2005\)](#) found the same thing: almost one-half (47%) of the cases involving women arrested for domestic violence against a heterosexual intimate partner were rejected by prosecutors, and another

16% were dismissed by a judge. Legal factors, such as a defendant's prior criminal arrests, use of a weapon, victim injury, and, most importantly, the type of arrest (i.e., dual vs. single arrest), all affected prosecutors' decisions to take these cases. Female defendants arrested for offending against a male intimate partner were treated more leniently than either male defendants or women arrested for domestic offences involving other types of relationships (i.e., familial, homosexual).

3. What happens to women arrested, prosecuted and convicted of domestic violence offenses?

Despite the apparent leniency of the criminal justice system with regard to female perpetrators, women are now more consistently being referred to batterer intervention programming. Presence of women, as offenders, in treatment programs for domestic violence offenders is the direct result of legislation mandating the arrest of perpetrators in cases where police respond to a call and determine that domestic violence has occurred. In brief, in the late 1980s, most states enacted Law Enforcement Protection legislation. This legislation, commonly referred to as "warrantless arrest," allows police who respond to a domestic violence call to arrest the abuser and press charges themselves. In these cases, the victim does not have to file a warrant against the abuser before an arrest is made. These laws remove the burden of pressing charges from the victim and have resulted in a substantial increase in the number of domestic violence arrests and convictions. Interestingly, this same legislation has resulted in a significant number of women being arrested and prosecuted for domestic violence offenses (Martin, 1997). Although the arrest of women was clearly an unintended consequence of mandatory arrest statutes (Swan & Snow, 2002), their sudden appearance in court-mandated treatment programs has had a dramatic impact on the national debate regarding female initiated violence. As a result of women being court-mandated into batterer treatment programs, it is no longer possible to suggest that women are infrequently the initiators of violence in their intimate relationships (Carlsten, 2002). If this were true, there would be very few women arrested, successfully prosecuted, and mandated into treatment as part of a criminal sentence.

Unfortunately, however, there is very little empirical information available about female domestic violence offenders and, currently, women convicted of domestic violence offenses are mandated into BIPs designed to intervene with male offenders (Dowd, 2001). In theory, this is less than ideal, as there is widespread uniformity in the treatment of male batterers (Bennett & Williams, 2001) and an important element of that treatment is a patriarchal analysis of violence against women. Perhaps more importantly, meaningful answers about the most effective intervention strategies for female batterers might not be found by extrapolating information from male batterers. As the reviews of the male batterer intervention program literature have consistently indicated, methodological limitations have compromised most evaluations and prevented meaningful synthesis and analysis and recent experimental evaluations of BIPs for male batterers suggest they are having little, if any, positive effect (Davis & Taylor, 1999; Davis, Taylor, & Maxwell, 1998; Dunford, 2000; Feder & Forde, 2000).

Given the gender politics surrounding the issue of female violence occurring in intimate relationships, it is not surprising that much of the available research on this topic has been devoted to fleshing out differences between men and women arrested for domestic violence offenses (Fiebert & Gonzalez, 1997; Hamberger, 1997; Hamberger, Lohr, & Bonge, 1994; Hamberger & Potente, 1994; Martin, 1997; Miller, 2001; Morse, 1995; Swan & Snow, 2002). The effect of this small body of research has been to delineate differential causes and consequences of intimate partner violence for both male and female participants.

More recently, the issue of how men and women in BIPs may be similar has been addressed in several studies, the findings of which suggest that women may be more similar to men than was previously expected. For example, in a recent study of 52 women referred to treatment for abusive behaviors, women who were violent towards their partner only (PO) were found to use controlling violence less frequently, defensive or reactive violence more frequently, report witnessing their mothers' physical violence less frequently and report fewer traumatic symptoms, relative to women who were generally violent (GV) (Babcock, Miller, & Saird, 2003). In this respect, women in BIPs may be similar to men in BIPs in that there might be within group differences along several dimensions, which might hold promise for different clinical interventions [for a recent review of male, batterer subtypes, see Holtzworth-Munroe, Meehan, Herron, Rehman, & Stuart, 2000]. Other recent studies have suggested that women and men referred to BIPs are more similar than dissimilar. Specifically, Busch and Rosenberg (2004) discovered that women were similar to men in terms of their use of severe violence, inflicting severe injuries on their partners, use of violence against non-intimates and usage of alcohol and/or drugs at the time of their arrest. Similarly, Henning, Jones, and Holdford (2003) discovered that the women were demographically similar to the men in terms of childhood experiences, exposure to interparental conflict and mental health history.

In terms of evaluating the intervention services provided to women offenders in community based BIPs, there have been very few evaluation studies. Of those that are available, two seem to suggest that some women might benefit from successfully completing the BIP. Specifically, in a pilot study of 26 women who successfully completed a community-based BIP as part of a criminal sentence, [Carney and Buttell \(2004\)](#) discovered that the women comprising their sample were less passive/aggressive and less likely to use physical force on their partner at the conclusion of the treatment program. Although the authors suggest that the positive findings were tempered somewhat by the small sample size and the limitations inherent in the design, they are nonetheless instructive in that they suggest that women arrested, convicted and sentenced to community-based treatment for domestic violence offenses experience change, in the desired direction, on constructs related to a multidimensional conceptualization of violence (i.e., truthfulness, violence, lethality, control, and stress coping abilities). Perhaps most importantly, they suggest that the issues addressed in batterer intervention programs may have relevance for both male and female domestic violence offenders. This is an important consideration, since women continue to be treated in programs designed for male batterers, which is a situation that is unlikely to change in the near future.

Similarly, [Carney and Buttell \(2005\)](#), in a study of 75 women (39 treatment completers and 36 drop-outs) sentenced to a community-based BIP as part of a criminal sentence for domestic violence offenses, discovered that, like the male batterers at the same BIP, the women comprising their sample had attachment related issues. Their investigation of attachment related issues among female domestic violence offenders was the direct result of two converging issues. First, was the review of the literature regarding attachment style and domestically violence men conducted by [Sonkin and Dutton \(2003\)](#), where they suggested that “men whose violence was predominantly or exclusively in intimate relationships probably have an attachment disorder” (p. 109). Consequently, [Sonkin and Dutton \(2003\)](#) conclude that, “incorporating attachment theory into batterer treatment is well founded” (p. 110), which heavily influenced the study by [Carney and Buttell \(2005\)](#) by providing the conceptual framework for their investigation of attachment issue among female domestic violence offenders. Second, was the recommendation by [Henning et al. \(2003\)](#), that such a study would be of critical importance because “exploring the attachment styles of female offenders and their attitudes towards the use of physical aggression will be helpful in determining whether these theories can account for female-perpetrated intimate partner abuse” (p. 851).

The results of the [Carney and Buttell \(2005\)](#) study are important because they represent the first empirical investigation of childhood attachment patterns, via levels of interpersonal dependency, among women in treatment for domestic violence offenses. Their findings suggest that the women comprising their sample were overly dependent on their partners, an adult indicator of insecure attachment style, that level of interpersonal dependency was directly related to a multidimensional conceptualization of domestic violence (i.e., psychological aggression, physical assault, sexual coercion and injury), that interpersonal dependency was an important variable in predicting treatment completion and that the BIP increased the level of interpersonal dependency among treatment completers. Specifically, their data suggests that women court-mandated into a BIP for domestic violence offenses demonstrated elevated levels of interpersonal dependency on their partners, relative to a non-violent comparison group. In this regard, their findings are important because they suggest that attachment issues, particularly excessive dependency, might become an important target of intervention efforts in BIPs treating female offenders. Perhaps more importantly, if women continue to be treated in intervention programs designed for male offenders, the identification of constructs that have relevance for both male and female batterers is of particular importance.

4. Conclusion

As our discussion demonstrates, female perpetrated abuse in intimate relationships is at least as common as male abuse, often extends to the same degree of severity, can result in serious negative outcomes for male and female victims, and seems to reflect a common set of background causes. Contrary to early socio-political explanations, which proposed that women’s use of aggression reflected primarily, or solely, self-defense strategies in response to male initiated abuse, women are known to commit unilateral abuse. This suggests that many couples in treatment for partner abuse and perhaps slightly fewer who come into contact with the criminal justice system require services that address the perpetration and victimization needs of both partners. In fact, in their prospective longitudinal study in Dunedin, New Zealand, [Ehrensaft, Moffitt, & Caspi \(2004\)](#) found that common couple abuse (i.e., non-severe abuse) was characterized primarily as woman-to-man abuse while clinically significant abuse (i.e., involving injuries and/or weapons) involved primarily mutual abuse, leading the authors to question the utility of focusing partner abuse preventions and interventions solely on male aggression.

Preliminary research suggests that women who might best be categorized as primarily victims of partner abuse can be distinguished from women who are more appropriately categorized as primarily perpetrators. Furthermore, female domestic violence offenders share many of the same characteristics as male offenders, including similar motives and psycho-social characteristics (prior aggression, substance use, personality disturbance, etc.). Research comparing familial risk factors for intimate abuse also indicates greater similarities than differences for men and women who use abuse in relationships (e.g., witnessing interparental abuse, physical abuse by a caregiver). As discussed previously, there is also some evidence to suggest typologies hypothesized to exist among male perpetrators might translate well to women perpetrators. Finally, research to date suggests that female abusers are about as likely as male abusers to have an Axis I disorder but are substantially more likely to be in the clinical range on Axis II. In contrast, studies clearly indicate that female victims of partner abuse are not more pathological than other women, though there is some evidence they are more aggressive (Ehrensaft et al., 2004).

An improved understanding of the etiology of women's aggression has begun to shape interventions for domestically violent women. We eagerly await more treatment evaluation research and are hopeful that reconceptualizing partner abuse treatment for use with female abusers will have the added benefit of challenging prevailing assumptions that men's abuse against their female partners is grown directly out of patriarchy. Abuse in intimate relationships reflects a diverse constellation of predictors. Professionals would do well to consider risk factors common to general violence when evaluating male and female abusers as well as possible intervention needs of both partners.

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