

# Violence Against Women

<http://vaw.sagepub.com/>

---

## Women's Use of Force: Complexities and Challenges of Taking the Issue Seriously

Nancy Worcester

*Violence Against Women* 2002 8: 1390

DOI: 10.1177/107780102762478055

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://vaw.sagepub.com/content/8/11/1390>

---

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

Additional services and information for *Violence Against Women* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://vaw.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://vaw.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

Citations: <http://vaw.sagepub.com/content/8/11/1390.refs.html>

>> [Version of Record](#) - Nov 1, 2002

[What is This?](#)

# Women's Use of Force

## *Complexities and Challenges of Taking the Issue Seriously*

NANCY WORCESTER

*University of Wisconsin–Madison*

---

---

*This article discusses the complexities, challenges, and urgency surrounding addressing women's use of force. The author emphasizes that women's and girls' use of force needs to be analyzed using a framework that keeps power and control central to the definition of domestic violence and identifies that violence by men and women takes place within a social, historical, and economic context in which men's and women's roles, opportunities, and social power differ. The article builds on an understanding of women's use of force in heterosexual relationships; however, a similar contextual analysis is also applied to women's use of force in teen dating relationships, lesbian relationships, and against children.*

---

---

*Many people are paying enormous attention to the issues of girls' and women's violence. More women are being arrested for assaulting their partners. Many domestic violence programs are making difficult decisions about whether to run "abuser" groups for arrested women or whether women arrested for fighting back are more appropriately served by being in support groups for battered women (Wisconsin Coalition Against Domestic Violence, 2001).*

AUTHOR'S NOTE: My thoughts on this important topic are very much in flux. I share some of my thinking in progress in hopes that you will share your thinking with me. I take responsibility for the ideas I express in this article, but I also want to acknowledge that Darald Hanusa, members of the Wisconsin Coalition Against Domestic Violence Education and Emerging Issues Committee, and people at workshops and "think tanks" on this topic have played crucial roles in helping me think through some of these issues. I especially thank Barbara Herbert for getting me started on this work by signing me up as her copresenter on this topic at the American Public Health Association Conference, November 1998, in Washington, D.C., and Mariamne Whatley for her daily inspiration and support with this and many other projects. I would also like to thank Andrea Bible, Shamita Das Dasgupta, and Sue Osthoff for their help with this article. Parts of this article are revised from a shorter version published in the spring of 2001 in the *Wisconsin Coalition Against Domestic Violence Newsletter*.

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN, Vol. 8 No. 11, November 2002 1390-1415

DOI: 10.1177/107780102237409

© 2002 Sage Publications

1390

The antifeminist backlash picks up on "conflict tactics"-type studies or the anti-domestic violence movement's own work to give visibility to lesbian violence in order to promote the idea that women are as violent as men. In most audiences, someone knows one man who has been hurt by an intimate partner and his story must be told. Many well-meaning professionals who have chosen to devote their lives to humanitarian service work pride themselves on publicly demonstrating that their services are equally available to men and women without the information, training, or professional support to develop an analysis of the limitations and dangers of a gender-neutral approach to antiviolence work.

This article examines some of the complexities, challenges, and urgency of reintegrating a gender analysis into violence work and addressing the issue of women using force<sup>1</sup> in ways that build on more than 25 years of work by some of the best thinkers and organizers addressing difficult issues within the battered women's movement. This article particularly draws on my experiences of working with the Education and Emerging Issues Committee of the Wisconsin Coalition Against Domestic Violence to encourage dialogue on the issue through a series of conference presentations, a 1-day membership meeting, think tanks, a special newsletter on this issue, and hours and hours of discussions. The article also builds on my many years of working within the battered women's movement, collaborating with others to ensure that the movement addresses challenging, cutting edge issues. I welcome the wider readership of this journal and encourage readers to explore how debates around the issue of women and girls using force can help set the agenda for the next decade of antiviolence research and activism.

Core issues of power and control and the context of violence need to be central to discussions and policies regarding domestic violence and battering and women's use of force. Violence by men or women and violence against men or women take place within a social, historical, and economic context in which men and women, in general, still play different roles, have different opportunities, and have different social power. Thus, it is important that violence is not simplistically "counted" separately from the context of societal inequalities and gender roles violence helps to keep in place. In addressing the issue of women using force, counting the violence should never be the goal so much as looking

at the meaning and consequences of violence in people's lives. It is urgent that antiviolence thinkers, researchers, workers, and activists take leadership roles in taking women's use of force seriously so that information on female violence is no longer given from just antiwomen, backlash perspectives. The challenge is to take violence by women seriously without losing sight of the fact that the patterns of male and female violence within adult intimate relationships are usually very different, often happen within different contexts, and generally have very different consequences and that both the violence itself and the barriers to ending violence are related to societal inequalities.

Female violence must be taken very seriously. Female perpetrators must be held accountable. I know there are women who are violent. I have been curious about violent women ever since I read MacDonald's (1992) book *Shoot the Women First* ("The first book to tell why women are the most feared terrorists in the world," back cover), the cover of which exclaimed,

"Shoot the women first" is the advice given to German police teams handling terrorist incidents, but is recognized as valid by anti-terrorist groups the world over. Armed men may hesitate before they shoot, women rarely do. They are more ruthless, more determined and consequently more feared than their male comrades, and make the most deadly adversaries.

I am a firm believer that many women are extremely good at whatever they decide to do, so it makes sense that if a woman "decides" violence is necessary, she might be very good at it. It also makes sense to me that when girls and women are rewarded for paying attention to what other people need and for developing good verbal and emotional skills, they could turn those areas of expertise into something that could very much hurt a loved one. Indeed, unless our society starts to give clearer, more consistent messages that we will not reward or ignore violence, I think we should expect that more girls will get the message that violence is acceptable or even glamorous. I am obviously writing this article, however, because I want to inspire readers to take female violence seriously without losing sight of the general patterns in intimate partner violence (i.e., male violence keeps women from maximizing their fullest potential) that need to guide antiviolence work. We need to be careful that our curiosity about female

violence, our knowledge that some women are violent and thus that some men get hurt in heterosexual relationships, and our commitment to holding abusers accountable do not get in the way of thinking through the complexities of addressing the issues of female violence.

It is time to reframe a number of issues.

### **CONNECTING AND DISCONNECTING: ISSUES OF GIRLS AND WOMEN USING FORCE**

The question, "What about girls and women using force?" is so big. There are many answers and many more questions than answers. When the Wisconsin Coalition Against Domestic Violence Education Committee first initiated discussion on this topic, we did not want to leave out any part of the question, so we tried to address all the following questions in our first short workshop:

1. What are the experiences of domestic abuse programs with girls' and women's use of force?
2. What are the political ramifications of asking this question? How do we frame the issue to make sure we are not compromising the integrity of the battered women's movement? What are the dangers of addressing this issue?
3. Do men and women use violence in different ways? Much on the power and control wheel may look the same for male and female violence. But what about the "using male privilege" piece that supports violence against women? A lesbian batterer may use homophobia to hurt her partner, but are there similar privilege or social oppression weapons being used if a heterosexual woman is a perpetrator?
4. What are the similarities and differences of batterers' treatment for men and women? Are there different ways to hold men and women accountable for their violence? Will the same types of intervention work for abusive women and abusive men?
5. What are the similarities and differences between women as perpetrators in lesbian versus heterosexual relationships? (What are the similarities and differences between women as victims or survivors in lesbian versus heterosexual relationships?)
6. If we believe that violence against women is related to gender socialization, are we moving toward boys and men being less violent and/or girls and women being more violent? What are we doing right? What are we doing wrong?

7. Should we make these questions more central to the battered women's movement? If so, how?
8. Are there other forms of girls' and women's use of force we should be addressing? What else should we be discussing?

The fact that more than 100 people attended a workshop, which we expected to be very small (it was scheduled at the same time as many workshops by popular national speakers), demonstrated that people are eager for a chance to talk about the issues. Time ran out much too quickly, and it became obvious that each question needs weeks, not minutes, of discussion time. It was clear that one challenge for the antidomestic violence movement is making the time and creating safe spaces so that we can slowly and carefully develop our thinking about the different ways girls and women may use or are accused of using force at different ages and in different contexts.

Many of us who have worked on a range of violence against women issues have felt connected under the widest violence against women "umbrella" but have found times when we needed to specifically work on lesbian violence, sexual assault, gender harassment, elder abuse, or heterosexual domestic violence; we have done that specific work with the bigger picture of analysis of violence against women in mind. In the same way, it will be important to remember the context of sex-role socialization, societal inequalities, and violence as power and control as the questions about girls and women using force are addressed in relation to teen dating violence, gang violence, lesbian battering, child abuse, elder abuse, heterosexual domestic violence, and other issues. Unique aspects of each of these topics merit much in-depth exploration, and simultaneously, each needs to be contextualized within the broader framework of violence against and by females within a violent, patriarchal society. (Key issues related to several of these topics are introduced at the end of this article.)

#### **STRATEGY: ACKNOWLEDGE THAT MEN GET HURT BY VIOLENCE**

Backlash against a movement is always a sign of how successful a movement has been. No one would be talking about whether

women are as violent as men if there had not been more than 25 years of organizing against violence against women; establishing shelters, anti-domestic violence programs, and support groups; working to get the criminal justice system to hold perpetrators accountable; and developing coordinated community responses to domestic violence. Quite rightly, violence against women has received much attention.

Who gets left out of attention focused on violence against women? Men and boys as victims of violence.

Acknowledging that men and boys get terribly hurt by violence may be just as important as exploring the issue of women as perpetrators of violence. It certainly helps shift the discussion in more fruitful directions. Acknowledging that men and boys are killed by violence (mostly by other men and boys) more often than are women and girls in this society may be an effective strategy for making a gender analysis more central to violence work.

Male violence not only hurts women but also disproportionately kills men, especially men of color. Of homicide victims from 1976 to 1999 in the United States, 76% were men, as were 88% of those who committed homicide (Fox & Zawitz, 2001b). White men between the ages of 15 and 25 are more likely to be killed than White women, and Black men are more likely to be killed than Black women.<sup>2</sup> Male violence particularly devastates Black communities. Black women aged 15 to 24 are killed at nearly the same rate as are White men in the United States, whereas Black men are killed at a rate 8.5 times higher than are Black women or White men (Kumanyika, Morssink, & Nestle, 2001).

Both the battered women's movement and many parts of the wider women's (liberation) movement have done an excellent job of making connections among images of women, the socialization of women and their roles in society, and violence against women. An important next stage of working on violence prevention must be to develop a more thorough gender analysis so that the roots of violence are better understood in relation to definitions of masculinity, the socialization of men and their roles in society. Hiding the prevalence of male violence (against both men and women) contributes to the climate in which it becomes acceptable or even fashionable to ask whether women are as violent as men. For example, despite the fact that almost all the so-called school violence that hit the headlines in the 1990s has been perpetrated by

(White) male youths, the media have consistently failed to note that, and one could easily get the idea that school violence is a gender-neutral problem. How many people have any idea about the disproportionate amount of violence committed by men?<sup>3</sup> While identifying that both men and women get hurt or killed by living in a violent society, a gender analysis also helps identify that men and women get hurt by violence in very different contexts. Men mostly get hurt by strangers, whereas women mostly get hurt by people they know and care about.<sup>4</sup> Women are more than five times more likely than men to be victimized by a spouse or partner, ex-partner, boyfriend, or girlfriend (Rennison & Welchans, 2000).

There is not a hierarchy of violence, but the ramifications for intervention, prevention, and long-term consequences are totally different for someone hurt by a stranger and someone hurt by a loved one. These are important issues to identify for anyone questioning the necessity of a gender analysis of violence. Many emergency room and criminal justice system personnel have observed that when someone (usually a man) is hurt by a stranger, they are likely to want to report the crime, to want the other person prosecuted, and to hope they will never see that person again. In contrast, a different pattern is observed when someone (usually a woman) has lived with or loved the person who is hurting them. Reporting the abuse has different ramifications when there are shared children, dreams, identities, finances, and futures and where reporting may cause escalation of the violence. Unlike stranger violence in which men are the main victims of what is usually a one-time occurrence, intimate partner violence, with women as the primary victims, tends to be an on-going pattern of abuse of power and control. Consequently, in general, violence disrupts the lives of men and women in quite different ways.

### GENDER, RACE, AND CLASS

Momentarily focusing on the seriousness of how much male violence hurts men may be an effective way to reassure men that we care about anyone getting hurt by violence, it may help us get on with our presentations and our work, and it may help contextualize the fact that violence against women happens within societies that allow and support the widest range of



violence. However, it is also important to recognize the limitations and dangers of this tactic.

First, it is vital to acknowledge that gender differences in homicide rates do not reflect the differences in quality of life for men and women. Many women hurt by violence get hurt every day. The woman who says, "I probably only got hurt once a year for 20 years, but I woke up every one of those other 364 days of the year wondering if that would be the day" (quote from a survivor in the video "Any Day Now," WomanReach, Inc. and the Domestic Violence Advocacy Council of Charlotte/Mecklenburg, 1991) reminds us how violence and the fear of violence affect the quality of women's lives.

Also, it is important to be careful not to leave out an analysis of how other inequalities in society are related to violence. Note that in the previous discussion of homicide victimization of Black and White people aged 15 to 24, gender analysis is meaningless unless the impact of race or racism on homicide is also examined. These figures show that Black women and White men are killed at similar rates and that the homicide rate is 4.2 times higher for Black than for White women. Black men are killed at a rate 35 times higher than are White women (Kumanyika et al., 2001).

Both race and class analyses are crucial in addressing violence and understanding that the battered women's movement, the criminal justice system, and other systems have particularly failed to adequately address the needs of many battered women of color, poor women, and other women from marginalized communities. Lack of appropriate services and policies may force some women to resort to using force or other unhealthy coping strategies. In *Compelled to Crime: The Gender Entrapment of Battered Black Women*, Richie (1996) wrote,

The extent to which some women experience this predicament [domestic violence] is directly related to the degree of stigma, isolation, and marginalization imposed by their social position. The choices are harder and the consequences are more serious for women with low incomes, women of color, lesbians, women who become pregnant at a young age, and others whose decisions, circumstances, and status violate the dominant culture's expectations or offend hegemonic images of "womanhood."

Studies that have been conducted from the standpoint of battered women have been overwhelmingly concerned with the experiences of White women. . . . The aggregate effect is that while *some*

battered women are safer in the 1990s than they were in the 1970s, and while we know more about *general* patterns in the population, we still have very little theoretical or empirical work that speaks to African-American battered women from low-income communities. Consequently, few anti-violence programs, criminal justice policies, or theoretical explanations are sensitive to ethnic differences or address cultural issues that give particular meaning to violence in intimate relationships for African-American or other women of color. Furthermore, those whose lives are complicated by drug use, prostitution, illegal immigrant status, low literacy, and a criminal record continue to be misunderstood, underserved, isolated, and . . . in serious physical and emotional danger. (pp. 2-12)

E. Assata Wright (2000) gives examples of well-meaning public policy having an adverse effect for women of color because no one thought through how policies like mandatory arrest might have an impact on these women's lives:

The mandatory arrest policy is particularly problematic for Black women because . . . they are more likely to fight back and protect themselves when being abused. In cases where a woman hits her abuser, she can be arrested along with the attacker.

Many Black women and Latinas may protect the abuser from jail even if it means risking their own safety. In a 1996 report on police brutality in New York City, Amnesty International found that between 1993 and 1994 there was a "substantial" increase in the number of Blacks and Latinos who were shot or killed while in police custody. Advocates point out that while women want protection from their batterers, they don't want him beaten by cops or worse, killed by them. (pp. 550-551)

Economic issues relate to battering in a number of ways, including both the relationship between poverty and family violence and that abused women arrested for assaulting their abusive partners may lose their employment opportunities for self-sufficiency. Kurz's (1999) research found that the poorest divorced women, those on welfare, experienced higher rates of violence than did any other groups of women and that the poorer the woman, the more serious the violence was that she experienced. She questions the relationship between poverty and abuse as follows:

What is the reason for the higher levels of violence reported by low income women? Are poor women more forthcoming about the amount of violence they experience, or do more of them report the violence to the police because they have less access to other kinds of legal assistance? These are possibilities, but at this point no data answer this question. It is also possible that something about the circumstances of those living in poverty contributes to the higher rates of violence among poorer men. For example, men from lower income groups may have a stronger belief in the legitimacy of violence than other men, since they typically hold more traditional gender ideologies than other men. It is not clear, however, that lower income men actually behave in more gendered ways than do other men. Another explanation for the higher rates of violence reported by poorer women could be that lower-income men have fewer ways of controlling their partners than other men. The higher men's social class, the more ability they have to control their female partners through their greater economic resources. (pp. 136-137)

The National Clearinghouse for the Defense of Battered Women (Bible & Osthoff, 1998) has raised awareness of the economic ramifications of battered women being arrested for and convicted of using force against abusive partners and then having a criminal record, which affects their financial situation.

We know many women, eager to "get the case over with," accept guilty pleas without being fully appraised of the potential consequences of having a record. Might a conviction bar a woman from certain employment opportunities, public housing situations, welfare benefits, or affect her immigration status or a custody determination? We want to work with defense counsel to help them better understand the consequences of a conviction and the disparate impact on women clients (since so many of the jobs barred by convictions are traditionally "women's work," such as child care and health care jobs, and because so many women, as primary caretakers for their children, are the ones to apply for public benefits and housing). (p. 8)

It is clear that researchers and practitioners need to more fully understand how gender, race, and class affect battered women's experiences and how and why they may choose to, or need to, use violence.

### DOMESTIC VIOLENCE = WOMAN BATTERING

Domestic violence is certainly not gender exclusive, but the pattern of male perpetrator and female victim reflects and is encouraged by societal power inequalities between women and men and serves to maintain gender inequality. In fact, domestic violence is an extreme example of gender inequality.

The battered women's movement was clearly built on a sophisticated understanding of how violence in intimate relationships relates to and helps perpetuate inequalities between women and men. As the movement grew more visible, as many more players became involved in providing services to victims of intimate violence, and as more funding became available, domestic violence became a hot topic and a very mainstream issue. It was no longer unusual, controversial, or even radical to work to end domestic violence. This was a very exciting phenomenon: Many more people knew about and benefited from domestic violence services, and whole communities identified roles different professionals could play in recognizing and responding to domestic violence. This mainstreaming of the battered women's movement coincided with a changing environment where the work of many aspects of the women's movement became less visible and debates about "political correctness" made it much more challenging to figure out how to work on societal inequalities. Although it was no big deal that people involved in this work gradually stopped calling themselves the battered women's movement and became known as people working against domestic violence, symbolically "women" visibly got left out of the name of the movement and out of the analysis of intimate partner violence. (Throughout this article, I use both the terms *battered women's movement* and *domestic violence movement*). Once an issue has a gender-neutral name, it is easy to forget that it is not a gender-neutral issue.

Renzetti (1999) illustrated the dangers of a gender-neutral approach to domestic violence in relation to the criminal justice system as follows:

The police, attorneys, and judges, like the backlash writers, argue that women, like men, must be held accountable for their behavior. To them, prosecuting women who have used violence against an intimate partner represents a gender-neutral application of the

law. However, by decontextualizing women's violence and scrutinizing it in terms of a male normative standard juxtaposed against stereotypes of respectable femininity, the justice system thereby treats unjustly many women who have used violence. The outcome will be—indeed, it already is—“gendered injustice.” Women are increasingly being treated like men by the legal system, even though their circumstances typically are quite different. If these differential circumstances are not taken into account, the outcomes can hardly be fair. (p. 49)

With more women getting arrested for domestic violence in heterosexual relationships, it will be increasingly important to have trustworthy assessment tools that help identify when women use force in self-defense or within the context of long-term battering rather than initiate violence as power and control. The complexities of assessing who are the victims and who are the perpetrators have long been issues for discussion in relation to lesbian violence. Burk (C. Burk, personal communications, May 11, 1999, & July 14, 2000) and others have observed that unlike those working on heterosexual domestic violence, people working on lesbian intimate violence have always had to look at how any behavior can be used as power and control, how any behavior can be used as a survival tactic, and the fact that victims may well identify as abusers. There is also an important “reporting artifact” that is recognized in the violence literature: Studies show that women are more likely than men to admit they are abusive (Dobash, Dobash, Cavanagh, & Lewis, 1998). In an article titled “Violent Women: Fact and Fantasy—Social Service Agencies Have the Responsibility to Know the Difference,” Edleson (1998) stressed that accurate assessment is vital for providing different effective interventions for women who use force in different ways, for different reasons. He summarized how the Domestic Abuse Project's *Women Who Abuse in Intimate Relationships* (Hamlett, 1998) treatment manual categorizes women who use force into the following three groups:

One group includes women who use violence in self-defense to escape or protect themselves from their partner's violence. Saunders (1986) found that this was the most frequently reported motivation for women's use of violence.

In a second group are women who have a long history of victimization at the hands of previous partners as well as during childhood. These women are described as taking a stance in life that “no

one is ever going to hurt me that way again," and their violence is interpreted as an effort to decrease their own chances of victimization.

Violent women in a third group are identified as primary aggressors who use their greater physical power to control their partners. (Edleson, 1998, p.3)

Obviously, it is of the utmost importance to recognize that many women who use force are battered women who are not safe. Breaking their isolation and helping them be safer may be even more important than it is for women who do not use force because battered women's use of violence may make them even more vulnerable to their partner's aggression (Bachman & Carmody, 1994).

In general, the context and consequences of male and female violence within intimate relationships is different. Although studies often report that women use violence as a conflict tactic as often as men, women are the recipients of more injurious and life-threatening violence committed by intimate partners than are men (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Women are also more likely than men to be killed by intimate partners.<sup>5</sup>

For much of the past decade, anti-domestic violence programs have been conscientiously letting their communities know that they are committed to helping both women and men in violent relationships. Although many anti-domestic violence programs do serve a few men, a committed public effort to reach out to male victims has not resulted in anti-domestic violence programs suddenly discovering they need to rethink their emphasis on serving women. In fact, no man has ever stayed in the first shelter for battered men, established in Britain in 1992 by the group Families Need Fathers (Bindell, 1999). Hanusa (D. Hanusa, personal communication, November 10, 1998) and others who lead abuser groups have observed that the services needed by heterosexual men who identify themselves as abused seem to be different from those needed by abused women because safety is less of an issue and leaving the relationship is not usually associated with increased danger as it is for abused women.

In "Counseling Heterosexual Women Arrested for Domestic Violence," Hamberger and Potente (1996) concluded that domestic violence by women and men show distinctly different patterns.

First, although women are domestically violent, often at levels of severity similar to that of men, the impact of their violence is typically less than men's violence. Second, women tend to commit violence less frequently than do men, and for different reasons. Specifically, women tend to initiate physical assault motivated by a need for self-protection or retaliation of a previous assault by their partner. Men, in contrast, tend to identify control or punishment as the primary motivations for assaults on their partners. (p. 59)

Saunders (1986) showed that 71% of battered women arrested for domestic violence had used violence in self-defense. Hanusa (D. Hanusa, personal communication, November 10, 1998) observed that there is a functional difference in how men and women use violence in intimate relationships: Women use it to end oppression geared toward them, whereas men use it to control someone. In 32 in-depth interviews with women court-ordered or referred to counseling because they had used violence, Dasgupta (1999) found that "the most pervasive and persistent motivation for women's use of violence is ending abuse in their own lives" (p. 217), and "when viewed in terms of motives, intentions, and consequences, these women's use of violence emerges as instrumental; that is, the incidents are directed toward the resolution of conflicts or control of immediate surroundings" (p. 210), including the fact that "many of the women became physically aggressive with their partners when their children were being abused" (p. 208).

In examining the differences between male and female violence, it may be useful to keep in mind the definition of domestic violence as an on-going pattern in which one person controls the other person and one person thus lives in fear for her or his safety. It is crucial to keep asking who is afraid and who is not safe. We need to explore much more about how men and women use emotional control. We know women can be effective at using emotional control, but whether it takes on the same level of threat to safety and whether the other person lives in constant fear may be a major difference between male and female use of emotional control. In Dasgupta's (1999) study of 32 women who had used physical violence, it was clear that even the use of violence did not equalize who was in control and who was afraid in these heterosexual relationships.



Regardless of the degree of physical force women used, none of the interviewees believed that it made their partners fearful. Neither did it control their behaviors. This perception was not without its base in reality. A group of 10 men whose female partners had been arrested on domestic abuse charges and interviewed as a part of this study also denied that their partner's violence resulted in their experiencing prolonged or significant fear for their safety. This finding is supported by studies that indicate that men in violent relationships, compared to their female counterparts, express little fear of their partners and wives. (pp. 209-210)

In addition to the research quoted throughout this article, most of the ideas and analysis in this article have grown out of on-going discussions with domestic violence service providers, abuser group facilitators, and policy makers. Everyone agrees that much better research is needed on women's use of force. Meanwhile, however, many people agree that they have observed the following different patterns in male and female violence in intimate relationships and the different consequences of male and female violence in intimate relationships:

1. Male violence is more apt to be a pattern to be repeated in subsequent relationships rather than situational in particular relationships. Adult women who are perpetrators in one relationship are less likely to become perpetrators in their next relationship. How many domestic violence programs have served several women hurt by the same man? (Talking about this phenomenon is a good way of reinforcing that most men are not violent. The high percentage of women who get hurt by domestic violence is a reflection of the same men hurting several women rather than a high percentage of men being violent.)
2. Men are more likely to physically injure their partners.
3. Women are more likely than men to be killed by intimate partners and are more likely than men to be punched, hit, burned, thrown out of a window, or strangled by intimate partners (Belluck, 1997).
4. Men have an ability to control women and children by creating an ongoing pattern whereby women and children live in fear. (How much will this situation change when more women have access to guns? In Dasgupta's [1999] interviews with women who had used force, she concluded that "only when women picked up weapons, guns, knives, and household objects did their partners become temporarily afraid," p. 210. But the interviewees also said that having used force, including weapons, led to more abusive behaviors in the future by their male partners. What are the dynamics that create an on-going pattern of fear?).



5. A different pattern in ending male and female violence in heterosexual relationships has been observed: If a woman is hurting a man, the violence usually ends when the relationship ends. If a man is hurting a woman, the violence generally escalates and becomes most dangerous when the relationship ends and in subsequent years. Therefore, barriers to ending violence may be fundamentally different for men and women.

In the arena of sexual assault, activists working to end violence against women have been critical of the overemphasis on encouraging women to learn self-defense when the real issue that needs to be addressed is stopping male violence. Ironically, with domestic violence, the issue of women fighting back is now getting increased negative attention (and more arrests), with too little attention being paid to why women need to resort to violence. Why are other strategies failing to keep women safe within their intimate relationships? Once again, the key issue of how to stop men's abuse of power and control is left out when the discussions focus on whether women should use force to protect themselves.

### VIOLENCE IN LESBIAN RELATIONSHIPS

Lesbian battering includes many of the same issues as heterosexual domestic violence (power and control, fear, lack of safety) but is additionally affected by homophobia and a lack of services for victims of lesbian violence. In many communities, neither lesbian organizations nor anti-domestic violence programs have adequately addressed lesbian battering because of the fear that it could rip lesbian communities apart, dilute the issue of male violence against women, draw the "wrong" kind of attention to gay and lesbian issues, or draw the "wrong" kind of attention to a domestic violence program that may need financial support from a conservative community. Unfortunately, it is often the backlash to the violence against women movement that draws attention to lesbian domestic violence in an effort to say that women are as violent as men.

That women tend to be more likely than men to report they are violent (Dobash et al., 1998) must certainly affect studies of lesbian violence. I also wonder whether there is an additional reporting artifact in that women are more likely to identify abuse in a lesbian than in a heterosexual relationship. (Is more equality

expected in a lesbian relationship so that an abuse of power and control is more easily identified?). There are extremes related to lesbian violence: It often is ignored or, in contrast, reported at quite high rates (e.g., in surveys at the Michigan Women's Music Festival, although these surveys do not use scientific sampling methods). Why these extremes? Is less known about the prevalence of lesbian violence than about heterosexual violence because of the added complexities of studying it, or are people just more honest about saying that too little is known about the prevalence or consequences of lesbian battering? As someone who teaches women's health topics to 840 university students each year, I have curiously observed that students pay much more attention to the issue of lesbian battering than to other issues, such as legal discrimination against lesbians, lack of partner health insurance for lesbians, lesbian parenting, lesbian alcohol use, or lesbian menopause. Perhaps it is because the battered women's movement has been a major arena for important feminist discussion and debate during the past two decades and the issue rightly belongs here; there have not been similarly effective movements around which to organize other equally urgent lesbian issues. The good news is that because some people have made lesbian battering a visible issue, there are now some very good resources on this topic.<sup>6</sup>

An excellent article, "Ruling the Exceptions: Same Sex Battering and Domestic Violence Theory" by Merrill (1996), builds on the analysis of power and control in heterosexual domestic violence relationships to look at theoretical frameworks that bring together sociopolitical and psychological theories to include same-sex violence. Merrill identified the following three factors that make someone violent: (a) growing up learning how to be violent (obviously, everyone growing up in the United States learns how to be violent, but many people choose not to act on that); (b) having an opportunity to be violent; and (c) personally choosing to be violent. Merrill said that having the opportunity to be violent can be emphasized as a way to explain same-sex violence because homophobia allows someone to abuse a same-sex partner knowing that homophobia in the outside world will protect abusers from suffering negative consequences for their abusive behavior. Homophobia and heterosexism operate so that battering in same-sex relationships is ignored or not taken seriously;

the perpetrators clearly get the message that our society will tolerate it. Potentially violent women in lesbian relationships get the message that they will not be negatively sanctioned for being violent "in that kind of relationship." In contrast, potentially violent women in heterosexual relationships will get strong messages that their violence against male partners would not be socially acceptable or tolerated. Merrill concluded, "While the social phenomenon of prejudice (homophobia) does not cause lesbian or gay battering, it does create an opportune environment that supports this abusive behavior by its refusal to challenge it" (p. 15).

Lesbian battering experts have much to offer the anti-domestic violence field from their years of recognizing the complexities of identifying who are the perpetrators and who may have used force in self-defense. As anti-domestic violence programs work to develop more effective assessment tools for women arrested for using force, this may be an opportunity for activists who have worked on lesbian and heterosexual battering assessment to have more dialogue about what can be learned from each other. Clearly, all communities need to give both men and women consistent messages that violence in any relationship, by either partner, is not tolerated.

### WOMEN AS PERPETRATORS OF CHILD ABUSE

Of all the areas I work in, child abuse is the area I find the most mother blaming and outright woman hating, and it is the area in which I am most concerned about the increasing levels of woman blaming. Society in general and child protective services in particular assign responsibility for child abuse to mothers, regardless of who assaults the children or the context in which the abuse occurs.

There has now been more than a decade of organizing and education on the effects of domestic violence on children. Ironically, instead of people being better at seeing how child abuse is an extension and predictable component of the ongoing power and control that hurts women in domestic violence, more and more battered women are being charged with child abuse because they "allowed" their children to witness domestic violence or "failed to protect" them from harm, despite the power relations that

make it dangerous and impossible for many battered women to keep their children safe.

In their important article "Women and Children at Risk: A Feminist Perspective on Child Abuse," Stark and Flitcraft (1996) concluded,

Representative sample surveys indicate that fathers may be as likely or more likely than mothers to abuse children. . . . More important, there is little doubt that if a man is involved in a relationship, he is many times more likely than a woman to abuse the children. . . . National survey data indicate that men were responsible for two-thirds of the reported incidents of child abuse in which men were present in the relationships. (p. 75)

They are careful to point out that they reach this conclusion despite the obvious fact that women spend many more hours per day, per week with children and that many children are raised by single women.

The issues of child abuse and woman abuse are so clearly inter-related that it feels very intentional that others are not seeing or are choosing to ignore the connection. Years ago, Walker (1984), best known for her important work on battered woman syndrome, noted that if a child is being abused, the most predictable correlation is that the child's mother is also being abused. (That factor—the mother being abused—is more consistent and predictable than is any other variable, including age, income group, and geographic area.) Indeed, if the woman is abusing the child, it is even more predictable that the woman herself is being abused and that her abuse of the child is related to (or a consequence of) the ongoing power, control, and fear in her life. Walker found mothers were eight times more likely to hurt their children when they were battered than when they were safe from violence.

The example of child abuse is a model for how antiviolence activists and researchers can take the issue of women's use of force more seriously, that is, to make sure we take the context of women's violence very seriously. If women are more likely to hurt their children when they themselves are being hurt, it of course reinforces the need for ending violence against women, but it also reinforces our need to find more effective ways to communicate and collaborate with agencies and institutions that have not always seen violence against women as their issue. The Advocacy

for Women and Kids in Emergencies Program at Boston Children's Hospital (Schechter & Gary, n.d.) is a model that takes both child abuse and woman abuse seriously and does not leave anyone pulled between two systems or two victims. Schechter's work at the Advocacy for Women and Kids in Emergencies Program inspired others to work on the premise that if a child is being hurt, the mother may also be getting hurt and that child abuse intervention needs to be consistently done in a way that ensures the violence in a mother's life will be addressed. Different sets of advocates are available to help the child through the child protective service system, and another set of advocates helps the mother end the violence in her life. Instead of seeing a conflict between the interests of abused children and their mothers, a reframing of the issue helped this agency identify that in many cases, helping women to be safe is a very effective way to help children be safe.

### TEEN DATING VIOLENCE

The issue of women getting mixed messages about whether it is acceptable to initiate violence or to fight back for self-protection is particularly crucial in relation to work on girls' use of force in teen dating relationships.

An example of what is happening in teen dating violence is apparent in Molidor and Tolman's (1998) article, "Gender and Contextual Factors in Adolescent Dating Violence," which reported a study of 635 students surveyed about dating violence. The study found that male and female adolescents did not differ in overall frequency of violence in dating relationships. However, when researchers went beyond simply counting experiences of violence to looking for the context and consequences of teen intimate violence, they found that adolescent girls experienced significantly higher levels of severe violence and emotional reactions to the violence than did boys.

This is an important example of an article that clarifies the difference between the amount of violence and the consequences of violence for male and female teens. But most observations of teen violence do not make that important distinction. All too often, it is simply stated that girls are pushing and shoving just as much as boys these days. How many of us have been a part of meetings where researchers indicate they know there are limitations to the

usefulness of Conflict Tactics Scales but then quickly move on to simply report the interesting data they have that girls say they are using considerable amounts of violence? Once a girl has identified herself as "using violence," how much more difficult will it be for her to identify herself as needing support and safety planning if she is in a pattern of ongoing power and control?

The American Association of University Women Educational Foundation (1993) study on sexual harassment at school reported that sexual harassment was an issue for both girls and boys but stressed that the consequences were distinctly different. Boys reported knowing they had been harassed, but they could not remember when it started. In contrast, girls could remember exactly when they were harassed and the serious consequences (i.e., hating school, skipping school, not speaking up in class) that resulted from the harassment.

There is a dangerous trend in the resources designed for teens. Concern has been expressed about the lack of antiviolence resources appropriate for young men. There is a need for resources that are male positive but clearly antiviolence, in contrast to some of the present dating violence materials that some young men feel are antimale. Unfortunately, in aiming for this newly defined "market," there is a trend toward dating violence resources showing equal levels and consequences of male and female violence. It is crucial that resources and messages are developed and disseminated that appeal to young men but do not hide the different patterns and consequences of male and female violence.

The arena of the middle school is a most urgent one in which to address the question, "What about women or girls as perpetrators?" In many ways, middle school is "no person's land: Everyone is powerless" (D. Hanusa, personal communication, November 10, 1998), but it is also the key opportunity for helping young people learn healthy ways of reclaiming their personal power and setting very high standards for themselves as to how they will perform and what they will expect from future relationships. As more and more dating violence prevention resources and messages are rightly being aimed at this age group, it is important that educators and policy makers find effective messages that do not downplay the seriousness or prevalence of male violence or present violence in intimate relationships as a gender-neutral topic.

Whenever violence in a group is first noticed, attention is wrongly paid to the fact that much of the violence is probably "mutual violence." This is what happened with the initial observations of both adult heterosexual domestic violence and lesbian violence. Then, as people were more careful about understanding the dynamics and consequences, it became apparent that most domestic violence and lesbian battering was the ongoing pattern of one person abusing power and control in all or most aspects of the relationship. Now, middle school violence is increasingly labeled *mutual abuse*. Many well-meaning educators and youth leaders describe middle school girls as being as violent as middle school boys. What is happening here? Is there a short time in that "no person's land" when girls and boys have not yet learned their "appropriate" social roles regarding who should and should not be violent? Do they grow out of this a couple of years later when gender roles become exaggeratedly defined in high school? Is this another case in which it is dangerous not to be identifying the perpetrators (who are otherwise not held responsible or are sent to mediation)? Substantial resources need to be devoted to studying and preventing the dynamics and consequences of middle school violence.

On the other hand, if there is a real trend toward girls becoming more violent (either as perpetrators or learning that violence is the most effective way to not be controlled by someone else), it is urgent that this trend be recognized and addressed. If girls are learning that it pays to be violent, this raises important issues for the antiviolence movement. After more than 25 years of activism against violence against women, we should be reaching a point where we are starting to notice a decline in male violence. Is it possible that wider societal influences are so strong that instead of decreasing violence against women, we are seeing more young women get the message that their own violence is acceptable?

## CONCLUSION

It is time for antiviolence researchers and activists to take the question "What about girls and women using force?" seriously. The question is useful for reframing the analysis of violence to examine more carefully how male violence hurts both women and men, although in different ways and in different contexts. We



also need to find ways to take female violence seriously without taking a gender-neutral approach to violence. It is possible to simultaneously acknowledge individual female violence and show how the pattern of male violence against women reflects and perpetuates societal inequalities between men and women. We also must more carefully examine the intersection of race, class, sexuality, and gender in our antiviolence work.

The battered women's movement has been good at listening to each victim's story. Sometimes people's stories help us see general patterns that help us predict, understand, and interrupt ongoing power and control in relationships; sometimes a person's situation needs to be understood and addressed uniquely. We are fully capable of taking female violence against men seriously and serving individual men hurt by intimate partner violence without losing sight of the societal patterns of male violence hurting both men (usually as strangers) and women (usually within intimate relationships).

We can also use the question "What about female violence?" to explore other difficult issues. The gun industry, video games, and the media have been giving girls and women powerful messages about using violence. After more than 25 years of violence against women activism, is it possible that instead of diminishing or ending violence against women, we are seeing an increase in the number of girls and women who are learning that violence is an effective way to have power in a society that often limits their opportunity for healthy control in their own lives? What are we going to do about this?

Violence is a social issue. There is nothing "natural" about men being violent and women being less violent or passive. Male violence is rooted in the socialization processes our society has consistently imposed on boys and men. If there is an increase in girls and young women (and maybe even women of all ages) using force, it is a reminder that we need to start now to address socialization toward violence in new ways. The anti-violence against women movement, as with women's movements more generally, was never about making girls and women more like men. It was about building a fundamentally different, violence-free society. Asking hard questions about women's possible use of force may



be an important way of remembering the social change work that still needs to be accomplished. Much work needs to be done to create a world in which girls and boys learn they can have a healthy amount of control in their own lives without controlling someone else. All communities need to give clearer, more consistent messages that neither male nor female violence is ignored or rewarded. In our work for a violence-free society, what are we doing right and what do we need to do differently? How can we use the question "What about women and girls using force?" to help set the agenda for the next decades of violence research and activism?

## NOTES

1. Erin House (n.d.) has encouraged the use of the term *force* rather than *violence*, noting that

according to Webster's Dictionary, violence is defined as "rough or injurious physical force," "an unjust or unwarranted exertion of force and power." Thus, violence can be defined as a type of force, used unjustly, with the intention of causing injury. Force itself is descriptive of the use of physical strength to accomplish a task—but does not imply the same degree of wrong-doing or harmful intent. (p. 2)

2. In 1997, White men aged 15 to 24 were killed at the rate of 13.2 per 100,000 compared with White women aged 15 to 24, who were killed at the rate of 3.2 per 100,000 (Kumanyika, Morssink, & Nestle, 2001). Thus, White men are 4.2 times more likely to be killed than White women. Black women aged 15 to 24 are killed at nearly the same rate (13.3) as are White men in the United States. With a homicide rate of 113.3 per 100,000, Black men are killed at a rate 8.5 times higher than Black women (Kumanyika et al., 2001).

3. For example, men committed 88% of homicides in the United States between 1976 and 1999 (Fox & Zawitz, 2001b).

4. According to the National Crime Victimization Survey, in 2000, 54% of nonfatal violent crime (rape or sexual assault, robbery, and aggravated or simple assault) against men was committed by strangers and 44% was committed by intimates, other relatives, or friends or acquaintances. In contrast, 33% of nonfatal violent crime against women was committed by strangers and 66% was committed by intimates, other relatives, or friends or acquaintances (Rennison, 2001).

5. In 1999, 32.1% of female homicide victims were killed by intimates (in the cases in which the victim-offender relationship was known) compared with 3.6% of male homicide victims (Fox & Zawitz, 2001a).

6. Lesbian resource lists are available from both the Wisconsin Coalition Against Domestic Violence (phone: 608-255-0539) and the Wisconsin Domestic Violence Training Project (phone: 608-262-3635).

## REFERENCES

- American Association of University Women Educational Foundation. (1993). *Hostile hallways: The AAUW survey on sexual harassment in America's schools*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Bachman, R., & Carmody, D. C. (1994). Fighting fire with fire: The effects of victim resistance in intimate versus stranger perpetrated assaults against females. *Journal of Family Violence*, 9, 317-331.
- Belluck, P. (1997, March 31). A woman's killer is likely to be her partner, a new study in New York finds. *New York Times*, pp. A16-A17.
- Bible, A., & Osthoff, S. (1998, December). When battered women are charged with assault. *Double-Time: Newsletter of the National Clearinghouse for the Defense of Battered Women*, pp. 8-10.
- Bindell, J. (1999, March 23). On the peculiar world of Erin Pizzey. *The Guardian*, pp. 6-7.
- Dasgupta, S. D. (1999). Just like men? A critical view of violence by women. In M. F. Shepard & E. L. Pence (Eds.), *Coordinating community responses to domestic violence: Lessons from Duluth and beyond* (pp. 195-222). Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Dobash, R. P., Dobash, R. E., Cavanagh, K., & Lewis, R. (1998). Separate and intersecting realities: A comparison of men's and women's accounts of violence against women. *Violence Against Women*, 4, 382-414.
- Edleson, J. L. (1998, April). Violent women: Fact and fantasy-Social service agencies have a responsibility to know the difference. *Domestic Abuse Project Training and Research Update*, p. 3.
- Fox, J. A., & Zawitz, M. W. (2001a). *Homicide trends in the United States: Intimate homicide*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics. Retrieved May 29, 2002, from <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/homicide/intimates.htm>
- Fox, J. A., & Zawitz, M. W. (2001b). *Homicide trends in the United States: Long term trends and patterns*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics. Retrieved May 29, 2002, from <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/homicide/hmrt.htm>
- Hamberger, L. K., & Potente, T. (1996). Counseling heterosexual women arrested for domestic violence: Implications for theory and practice. In L. K. Hamberger & C. M. Renzetti (Eds.), *Domestic partner abuse* (pp. 53-76). New York: Springer.
- Hamlett, N. (1998). *Women who abuse in intimate relationships*. Minneapolis: Domestic Abuse Project.
- House, E. (n.d.). *When women use force: An advocacy guide to understanding this issue and conducting an assessment with individuals who have used force to determine their eligibility for services from a domestic violence agency*. Ann Arbor, MI: Domestic Violence Program/Safe House.
- Kumanyika, S. K., Morssink, C. B., & Nestle, M. (2001). Minority women and advocacy for women's health. *American Journal of Public Health*, 91, 1383-1388.
- Kurz, D. (1999). Women, welfare, and domestic violence. In G. Mink (Ed.), *Whose welfare?* (pp. 132-151). Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- MacDonald, E. (1992). *Shoot the women first*. London: Arrow Books.
- Merrill, G. S. (1996). Ruling the exceptions: Same sex battering and domestic violence theory. In C. M. Renzetti & C. H. Miley (Eds.), *Violence in gay and lesbian domestic partnerships* (pp. 9-22). New York: Harrington Park Press.
- Molidor, C., & Tolman, R. M. (1998). Gender and contextual factors in adolescent dating violence. *Violence Against Women*, 4, 180-194.
- Rennison, C. M. (2001). *Criminal victimization 2000: Changes 1999-2000 with trends 1993-2000*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics. Retrieved May 31, 2002, from <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/cv00.pdf>

- Rennison, C. M., & Welchans, S. (2000). *Intimate partner violence*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics. Retrieved May 31, 2002, from <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/ipv.pdf>
- Renzetti, C. M. (1999). The challenges to feminism posed by women's use of violence in intimate relationships. In S. Lamb (Ed.), *New versions of victims* (pp. 42-56). New York: New York University Press.
- Richie, B. E. (1996). *Compelled to crime: The gender entrapment of battered Black women*. Boston: Routledge Kegan Paul.
- Saunders, D. G. (1986). When battered women use violence: Husband abuse or self-defense? *Violence and Victims*, 1, 47-60.
- Schechter, S., & Gary, L. T. (n.d.). *Health care for battered women and their children*. Boston: Advocacy for Women and Kids in Emergencies Program, Children's Hospital.
- Stark, E., & Flitcraft, A. (1996). *Women at risk: Domestic violence and women's health*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Tjaden, P., & Thoennes, N. (2000). *Extent, nature and consequences of intimate partner violence: Findings from the National Violence Against Women Survey*. Washington: National Institute of Justice and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
- Walker, L. (1984). *Battered woman syndrome*. New York: Springer.
- Wisconsin Coalition Against Domestic Violence. (Ed.). (2001). [Special issue devoted to women's use of force.] *Wisconsin Coalition Against Domestic Violence Newsletter*, 20.
- WomanReach, Inc. and the Domestic Violence Advocacy Council of Charlotte/Mecklenburg. (Producers). (1991). *Any day now* [Motion picture]. (Available from Any Day Now, 500 West Trade Street, Box 360, Charlotte, NC 28202)
- Wright, E. A. (2000). Not a black and white issue: For battered and abused Latinas and Black women, dialing 911 may be risky business. In N. Worcester & M. H. Whatley (Eds.), *Women's health: Readings on social, economic, and political issues* (pp. 549-552). Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt.

Nancy Worcester, Ph.D., is an associate professor in Women's Studies and Continuing Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Worcester is the founder, coordinator, and key trainer for the Domestic Violence Training Project, which does statewide organizing and training in Wisconsin on health and school system responses to domestic violence. As a longtime women's health teacher, writer, and activist, Worcester has worked with a number of grassroots and national women's organizations in the United States and England, regularly teaches women's health to 400 students each semester, and is a coeditor of *Women's Health: Readings on Social, Economic, and Political Issues* and a coauthor of the National Women's Health Network's *The Truth About Hormone Replacement Therapy: How to Break Free of the Medical Myths of Menopause*. Worcester was the Education Coordinator for the Wisconsin Coalition Against Domestic Violence from 1985 to 1989 and has served on many Wisconsin Coalition Against Domestic Violence committees. She has organized numerous statewide conferences on health system responses to domestic violence, school system responses to domestic violence, and antioppression work for domestic violence leaders.