



Division for the Advancement of Women



"Violence against women: a statistical overview, challenges and gaps in data collection and methodology and approaches for overcoming them"

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**Defining and measuring violence against women:
Background, issues, and recommendations**

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Historical Background of Violence Against Women Movement in the United States

It has often been asserted that the current field of violence against women in the United States owes its existence to the re-emergence in the 1970s of the women's movement. At that time, there was an explosion of scholarship in the United States in the area of violence against women, as women trained in such diverse fields as philosophy, literature, law, sociology, anthropology, and psychology wrote about the experiences of women as victims of violence (Wilson, 1981). Many of these women approached their subjects within the context of a feminist ideology that viewed patriarchy as the root causes of violence against women (Brownmiller, 1975; Butler, 1978; Chapman and Gates, 1978; Martin, 1976; Walker, 1979; Wilson, 1981).

Much of the pioneering work on violence against women in the United States, such as Brownmiller's (1975) *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape*; Martin's (1976) *Battered Wives*, and Butler's (1978) *Conspiracy of Silence: The Trauma of Incest*, focused on the problems of rape, intimate partner violence, and incest. It grew out of the simple act of women coming together voluntarily in small, consciousness-raising groups to talk about their experiences as women (Brownmiller, 1975:xiii). In the process, they learned that violence was a prevalent part of women's lives; that victims of rape, incest, and partner violence were women they knew; that official responses to these victims could be decidedly anti-female; that services for victims were practically non-existent; and that empirical information on these subjects was woefully lacking. Because they began to think differently about the subject of violence against women, they began to do something about it, including holding teach-ins, writing books, opening up safe houses, and working to reform laws dealing with sexual assault, domestic violence, and child abuse and neglect.

Early violence against women scholars and activists tended to examine the problems of rape, partner violence, and incest from a criminal justice perspective. They saw violence against women as a subset of crimes. As such, they focused their attention on reforming criminal codes to better reflect the experiences women were having as victims of rape, incest, and intimate partner violence. For example, early feminists worked to have rape laws expanded to include sexual assaults that were perpetrated in the context of temporary or permanent mental incapacity. They also worked to make the criminal justice system more responsive to the needs of female victims.

Beginning in the 1990s, there was a shift in the way some researchers and activists in the United States approached the subject of violence against women: Instead of viewing violence against women primarily as a criminal justice problem, they began to view it primarily as a public health problem. This paradigmatic shift was influenced, in part, by the fact that various leading public health officials in the United States began voicing concern that violence against women was a leading cause of death and morbidity for American women. For example, in 1989, Surgeon General Everett Koop asserted in an interview for the *Los Angeles Times*, that violence against women was the number one public health risk to adult women in the United States (*Los Angeles Times*, 1989). Three years later, Surgeon General Antonio Novello reiterated this fact in the

Journal of the American Medical Association by stating that violence remains the leading cause of injuries to U.S. women ages 15 to 44 (Novello, 1992).

This paradigmatic shift resulted in more and more cooperation between U.S. criminal justice and public health agencies to conduct research on violence against women and to develop effective prevention and intervention strategies and policies. For example, in 1993, the U.S. Department of Justice's National Institute of Justice and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Centers for Disease Control and Prevention collaborated to jointly sponsor – through a grant to the Center for Policy Research – a national telephone survey on violence against women, which was conducted from November 1995 to May 1996. The National Violence Against Women Survey (NVAWS), as it came to be called, queried 8,000 U.S. women about their lifetime experiences as victims of various forms of violence, including rape, intimate partner violence and stalking. To provide a context in which to place women's experiences, the NVAWS also sampled 8,000 U.S. men.

This paradigmatic shift in viewing violence against women as a public health rather than a strictly criminal justice problem was advanced further when the World Health Organization's published its groundbreaking *World Report on Violence and Health*. In that report violence is defined as:

“The intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation (Krug et al 2002:5).”

As Dean (2004) points out in a recent article in the *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, although many of the acts that are defined as violence against women under a public health perspective are also defined as violence against women under a criminal justice perspective, there are some important differences. First, the public health definition of violence against women includes acts that result in psychological harm. Second, the public health perspective includes acts involving deprivation and neglect, which under most U.S. criminal codes usually only apply to children or vulnerable adults who are severely deprived and/or neglected by their caretakers. And third, the public health perspective places more emphasis on the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator: Whereas, the criminal justice perspective defines murder, physical assault, sexual assault, and stalking as crimes irrespective of the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator, the public health perspective distinguishes between acts that perpetrated against women by family members and intimate partners versus those perpetrated by acquaintances or strangers (Dean, 2004). According to a public health perspective, the emphasis should be on violence perpetrated against women by intimate partners. As will be explained later, these differences in definition may have profound influence on what is included in a definition of violence against women.

A Human Rights Perspective on Violence Against Women

In recent years, another shift has occurred in the way researchers and activists view violence against women. Following such major events as the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna, the 1994 World Conference on Population in and Development, and the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, scholars and activists, especially those working in so-called developing nations, have come increasingly to view violence against women as a human rights issue rather than merely a criminal justice or a public health issue. In addition to recognizing the debilitating effects of physical and sexual violence perpetrated against women by private actors, such as by partners or family members in their homes, or by acquaintances and strangers in the community, this paradigm focuses attention on violence perpetrated against women by soldiers during times of war and internal conflicts; sexual assaults perpetrated against women in state custody by law enforcement personnel; rapes perpetrated against women in refugee camps by other refugees, local police, and/or military personnel; the trafficking of women for sexual exploitation or for menial labor; and harmful traditional practices, such as forced marriages, genital cutting, honor crimes, suttee (Human Rights Watch, 1999).

The human rights perspective also focuses attention on state-tolerated and state-sponsored discrimination against women. In many countries, statutory restrictions curtail women's freedom of movement, ability to inherit property, ability to divorce, and access to education, health care, and jobs (Human Rights Watch, 1999). In others, such restrictions, while not strictly legal, are nonetheless tolerated. The human rights perspective recognizes that these discriminatory practices make women more vulnerable to violent victimization and emotional abuse, that gender-based violence constitutes discrimination against women, and that violence intersects with and impacts on other aspects of women's well-being and their enjoyment of human rights.

How Should Violence Against Women Be Defined?

A discussion of the different paradigms used historically to frame the subject of violence against women begs the question: How should violence against women be defined for purposes of establishing research protocols to measure violence against women on an international basis? This question is critical because, as numerous scholars (e.g., Dean, 2004; DeKeseredy, 2000) have pointed out, how we define violence against women determines what types of acts are measured. If violence against women is defined narrowly, such as including only violent acts proscribed by criminal sanctions, or only acts perpetrated by intimate partners, the rates of violence produced by our measurement strategies will be much lower than if we use a broader definition, such as one that includes violent and non-violent acts perpetrated by all types of offenders.

A *criminal justice perspective* would result in a relatively narrow definition of violence against women, one that defines the problem as a subset of crimes perpetrated against women and female children by any type of offender. This definition would eliminate acts that may be very injurious to women, but are not illegal (e.g., psychological or emotional abuse, deprivation and neglect against adults here are not specially defined as vulnerable). It would also eliminate acts that are injurious to women but are nonetheless tolerated or even sanctioned by certain governments (e.g., genital

cutting, honor crimes). Another major problem with this perspective is that criminal codes vary enormously across countries and even across various jurisdictions within a country.

A public health perspective would result in a definition that appears to be broader than a criminal justice perspective because it includes non-violent acts that are not necessarily criminal (e.g., psychological abuse, deprivation, and neglect). However, because public health professionals have tended to focus on sexual violence by all types of perpetrators, but physical and emotional violence by only intimate partners, the public health approach is also overly narrow. For example, it has typically excluded such acts as violence perpetrated against women while in state custody.

A human rights perspective would provide the broadest definition of violence against women because it includes all types of violent crimes perpetrated against women and female children, as well as psychological abuse, deprivation, and mal-development. It would include harmful traditional practices, such as genital cutting, suttee, forced marriages, and honor crimes. It would also include state-tolerated and state-sanctioned discrimination that deprives women of their basic human rights.

Existing Violence Against Women Surveillance Systems in the United States

The United States has two official means of measuring violence against women on the national level: 1) the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Uniform Crime Reporting System (UCR) and 2) the Bureau of Justice Statistics' National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS). The Uniform Crime Reports provide information on the number and type of crimes reported to law enforcement agencies each year in the United States, as well as the number of reports cleared by arrest. Information for the UCR are generated from crime reports made to law enforcement agencies across the country. The National Crime Victimization Survey provides information on the number of crimes perpetrated against women and men 12 years of age and older each year in the United States. Information for the NCVS comes from a household survey that queries household members 12 years of age and older about their experiences with violent victimization in the six months prior to the survey.

In addition, there have been numerous independent surveys conducted on violence against women in the United States in the past three decades, including the National Violence Against Women Survey, the National Youth Survey, the National Women's Survey, and the National Surveys of Family Violence. These surveys vary widely with respect to respondent gender (male vs female vs both), age of respondent (18-25 vs 18 and over vs 18 – some cut-off age), frequency of data collection (once vs twice vs continuous), context of survey (health vs crime vs public safety vs dispute resolution), types of violence measured (incest vs intimate partner violence vs rape vs stalking), type of questions used to measure violence against women (behavioral specific vs open-ended), follow-up questions about possible injuries incurred and public and health services used by the victim, and whether etiology, co-morbidity factors, incidence data, and chronicity data are collected.

Although there have been numerous surveys conducted on violence against women, the United States still lacks comprehensive and reliable data on the extent and nature of violence perpetrated against women. Three major factors contribute to the paucity of information generated by these different surveys: narrowness of focus, differing time frames, and inadequate measures. Each of these issues is discussed in more detail below.

Narrowness of Focus

For the most part, U.S. violence against women surveillance systems define violence against women very narrowly, usually from either a criminal justice perspective or a public health perspective. They tend to focus on just a few types of violence perpetrated against women (rape, intimate partner violence, and/or incest). Some surveys focus on just one type of violence, while others query respondents about multiple types of victimization. Still others do not even query women directly about their experiences with violence, but focus only on morbidity and/or use of health or social services. None of these surveillance systems includes questions about broader human rights issues, such as experiences with forced marriage, harmful traditional practices (genital cutting), state-sanctioned or state-tolerated discrimination, torture, or trafficking for purposes of sexual exploitation or forced labor. While these questions might not be appropriate in a survey of the general population of U.S. women, they would be appropriate with surveys that captured women in immigrant populations, especially those seeking political asylum.

Different Time Frames

U.S. surveillance systems vary widely with respect to the time frame in which violence is measured. While some surveys query respondents about recent experiences as victims of violence, others query respondents about experiences across the life span. And while some focus on prevalence (whether the victim has ever been victimized during a specific time frame), others focus on incidence (number of violent incidents in a particular time frame). Because some victimization rates represent victimization occurring over the lifetime while other represent victimization occurring in a year, victimization rates vary widely across the surveys and are not usually directly comparable. The National Violence Against Women Survey is the only survey that generated information about both lifetime and annual prevalence. It is also the only survey that examined both incidence and prevalence.

Inadequate Violence Against Women Measures

U.S. violence against women surveillance systems also vary widely in the types of questions they use to measure violence against women. Some surveys query women with direct questions about their victimization experiences (e.g., *Have you ever been a victim of sexual assault?*), while others use behaviorally-specific questions to cue respondents about possible victimization experiences (e.g., *Has a man or boy ever forced you to have intercourse? By intercourse I mean ...*). And some surveys query respondents about victimization, while others query respondents about perpetration, or both victimization and perpetration. Preliminary research has shown that

how researchers frame their questions about violent victimization can have a profound effect on disclosure rates (Tjaden, 2000b).

Recommendations

Given the limitations discussed above, the following recommendations are provided regarding future research on violence against women:

Use a Broad Definition of Violence Against Women

Because of the diversity of women's experiences as victims of violence, future violence against women surveillance systems should use as broad a definition of violence against women as possible. At the very least, it should incorporate both a criminal justice and public health perspective. At best, it should adopt a human rights perspective.

Specifically, future violence against women surveys should be designed to collect information not just on violent acts, such as physical assault, sexual assault, and threats of physical and sexual assault, but nonviolent acts, such as stalking and psychological and emotional abuse. Information generated from the National Violence Against Women Survey (NVAWS) shows that stalking is much more prevalent than previously thought; and that victims of stalking suffer serious psychological and social consequences as a result of their victimization (Tjaden and Thoennes, 1998).

Information from the NVAWS also shows a strong link between non-violent and violent acts perpetrated against women by male intimate partners: Specifically, men who engage in controlling and psychologically abusive behavior toward their female partners are significantly more likely to stalk them than men who do not engage in these controlling and abusive behaviors. Further, men who stalk their female intimate partners are significantly more likely to physically assault and rape them (Tjaden and Thoennes, 1998). By broadening the definition of violence against women to include stalking and psychological/emotional abuse, and examining the interrelationship among these components of violence and abuse, we will be better able to explain the conditions under which violence and abuse against women are likely to occur, especially in the context of intimate relationships.

Future violence against women surveillance systems should also collect data on all types of perpetrators. Although women suffer a significant proportion of their victimization at the hands of intimate partners, they also are victimized in large numbers by other types of offenders, such as family members, acquaintances, and strangers. A surveillance system that focuses only on violence perpetrated against women by intimate partners would provide inadequate data with which to comprehend fully the experiences of women as victims of violence. This is especially true with respect to women who may have been victimized while in state custody or while residing in refugee camps, or who have been victimized by a person with power over them (e.g., a teacher, coach, boss, priest).

In addition, future surveillance systems should expand the definition of violence against women to include child and adolescent victims. Data from the NVAWS show that violence starts at an early age for both women and men. More than half of the female victims and nearly three-quarters of the male victims of rape identified by the NVAWS were raped before the age of 18; and about half of all respondents to the NVAWS (men and women alike) were physically assaulted by an adult caretaker as a child (Tjaden and Thoennes, 2000:38). Moreover, data from the NVAWS show that women who were raped/physically assaulted as a child or adolescent were significantly more likely to be raped/physically assaulted as an adult (Tjaden and Thoennes, 2000:38). By including child and adolescent victims in our definition of violence against women, we will be able to more accurately estimate the prevalence of violence against women and the relationship between victimization as a minor and victimization as an adult.

Finally, future surveillance systems should broaden their definition of violence against women to incorporate a human rights perspective. This will ensure that data collection strategies are developed that will measure women's experiences with such human rights abuses as torture, forced marriage, state-sanctioned and state-tolerated discrimination, and dangerous traditional practices, such as genital cutting, suttee.

Collect Data on Recent Violence And Violence Occurring Over the Life Span

Because of the relationship between abuse experienced at an early age and subsequent abuse, it is imperative that future violence against women surveillance systems should be designed to collect information about violence experienced across the life span.

Adopt a Multiple Definition/Multiple Design Approach to Collecting Data

Whenever possible, future violence against women surveillance systems should adopt a "multiple definition/measurement design" (Tjaden, 2003). The NVAWS research team employed this approach with respect to defining and measuring stalking. At the time the survey was designed, little was known about stalking, there was no universal definition of stalking, and state anti-stalking statutes varied widely in their definitions of stalking. Not wanting to be confined to one definition of stalking, investigators designed the questionnaire in a way that allowed them to analyze the data using multiple definitions of stalking.

For example, they included in their questionnaire direct questions about stalking victimization (e.g., *Have you ever been stalked?*), as well as a series of behaviorally-specific screen questions adopted from descriptions of stalking situations described in the research literature (e.g., *Have you ever been followed or spied on? Have you ever been sent unsolicited letters or written correspondence? Have your ever received unsolicited phone calls?*). They followed up the screen questions with a detailed incident report for each type of perpetrator identified by the respondent. This incident report included questions about the respondent's level of fear; whether they thought they or some one close to them would be seriously harmed or killed by their

assailant; whether the perpetrator ever directly threatened them; and whether they thought they had been stalked.

This methodology allowed the investigators to compare prevalence and characteristics of stalking victimization using different definitions of stalking (Tjaden and Thoennes, 2001). For example, one operational definition required stalkers to overtly threaten their victim, while another required victims to only feel a high level of fear. It also allowed investigators to compare victim definitions of stalking with legal definitions of stalking (Tjaden, Thoennes, and Allison, 2000). Obviously, stalking prevalence rates varied by definition used. In general, less restrictive definitions yielded higher prevalence rates, while more restrictive definitions yielded lower rates.

Using a “multiple definitional/measurement” approach can be a bit messy. For example, it is harder to present data when there are multiple estimates of stalking victimization. Moreover, there is not a single estimate to feed to the media or policy makers. However, this approach is more intellectually honest because it demonstrates that the undertaking of science is not a purely objective process. It also reflects differences that often exist in the real world about the definition and meaning of certain acts, including acts of violence against women.

Conduct Research on the Effects of Different Methodologies on Survey Outcomes

Because there is some evidence that how researchers frame their questions about victimization can affect disclosure rates, it is imperative that research be conducted on how different methodologies can impact survey findings. Specifically, research needs to be conducted on the effects of survey context, interviewer gender, and question framing.

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