



MEN AS VICTIMS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

SOME ISSUES TO CONSIDER

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Contents

Introduction	2
Making Claims about Violence	3
Men, Boys and Violence: The Big Picture	5
Violence in a Public Setting	5
Violence Perpetrated by Men	6
Women's Violence	7
Defining Domestic Violence	9
The 'Default' Position	9
Definitions and Research Methods	9
Researching Domestic Violence: Some Concepts	14
Men as Victims: Some Claims and Agendas	20
Anecdotes	20
Making Claims from a 'Men's Rights' Perspective	22
Making News: Publishing and 'Men's Rights'	23
Men as Victims: What the Research Indicates	25
Official Records	26
Police Records	26
Hospital Data	26
Surveys	28
Crime and Safety Surveys	28
Community Surveys	30
The Conflict Tactics Scales Studies	32
Problems with the Conflict Tactics Studies	39
Aggregated Data and Reporting	39
The 'Truthfulness' of Claims	41
The Context of Violence	42
The Family Violence and Feminist Frameworks Compared	44
Recent Australian Research	47
A Qualitative Picture	49
Challenges for Future Thinking about Male Victims and Violence	56
Afterword	62
References	65

*T urge feminists . . . to seize this issue and make it our own'*¹

Introduction

It is commonly believed that women are the typical victims/survivors of domestic violence, and that most perpetrators are men. To varying degrees, this view has shaped different stances on and responses to domestic violence as a social problem, in areas ranging from government policy to feminist 'grass roots' campaigns. However in the United States (US) since the late 1970s, and, more prominently in the last few years in several western societies including Australia, this focus on women as the victims of domestic violence has been criticised. Dissenting voices have come, in the main, from two sources. The first might loosely be termed 'men's groups' or organisations belonging broadly to a 'men's movement'. The second emanates from some social science researchers usually affiliated with the field of 'family violence'. These two sources do not hold identical views, but each argues that men, too, can be victims of domestic violence, and that this fact is insufficiently acknowledged in areas like government policy and general public awareness.

This Discussion Paper offers no neat and final answers to the often thorny issues posed by the question of male victims of domestic violence, because this does not seem an appropriate response, at least at this stage. Instead the Paper identifies questions and problems that need considered reflection and further work by people working to end domestic violence. The discussion is broadly informed by a feminist approach, where this stance is understood as not only entailing a basic commitment to ending the existing subordination of women, but also being prepared to risk engaging with unfamiliar and even apparently antagonistic perspectives in an open-minded spirit. It necessarily includes detailed critical analysis of research methodologies that underpin studies claiming that women are as likely as men to be violent in the home. Readers who do not require this level of analysis may like to skip the section headed 'Researching Domestic Violence: Some Concepts'.

Making Claims about Violence

One helpful way to begin is to understand that when people talk or write about violence – whether on television, in a clinical manual, a feminist pamphlet, or over a coffee break at work – they have particular political and personal stakes in the subject matter being discussed, and make what some sociologists call 'claims' about it.² These claims may not simply be about the apparent immediate subject of violence, but may be about trying to achieve other goals through the specific way the violence is typified.³ The emotional currency of the topic of violence helps lend weight and persuasiveness to other agendas. So, for example, statements condemning mass shootings may try to promote the cause of gun control.

Seeing the issue of men as victims of domestic violence as a claim can help disentangle what turn out to be several quite different underlying agendas and investments. Each of them must be assessed on its own particular terms. Some claims about male victims belong to the realm of male survivors of violence more broadly, in which men and boys have begun to speak out about their own experiences and to argue that, like female victims/survivors, they deserve to be heard and believed rather than (as still often occurs) marginalised if not downright ignored. These claims can be quite compatible with a feminist understanding of violence. Indeed, some men working in this area are actively pro-feminist in their understanding and activism.

However, claims about male victimisation are also sometimes used to undermine feminist arguments about, and work against, violence against women, and even to attack feminism more generally. This kind of result tends to be associated with the 'men's rights' end of the spectrum of men's groups, which draws somewhat selectively on an already slanted picture of social science research into family violence. The social science researchers do not themselves necessarily fall into a clear-cut division of simply promoting the interests of male victims or undermining feminism, especially when we keep in mind that the effects of some claims can be unintended. It is probably more helpful for all of us working in the area to rigorously examine the basis of our assumptions about domestic violence and to consider its possible impact on the ways that we think and act in relation to the issue.

² Best 1989, 1990; see also Nelson 1984, Walker 1990

³ Schwartz and DeKeseredy 1993: 250

Claims-making is connected to specific interests in defining a social problem in a particular way; and interests are backed up by resources – powerful ways of authorising statements about the importance and urgency of a particular issue. Resources help to shape who has ownership of the social problem, or the potential to control how it will be defined, and so treated, in society.⁴ In claims about violence, social science research is a crucial resource that needs careful scrutiny. And of course social science researchers have their own diverse interests, which may not neatly coincide with those of other claims-makers who use their research.

This Discussion Paper will argue that it is important to seriously consider the claim that men can be victims of domestic violence, but that the basis for this view must be critically investigated. It will begin by broadly contextualising the relationship of men and boys to violence in general, then move on to consider how domestic violence tends to be defined. This leads to an exploration of some fundamental concepts in research into domestic violence, which form a background from which we can examine specific claims made about men as victims of domestic violence. In assessing these claims, the Paper will give an overview of the kinds of agendas that seem to be at work in claims about men as victims. We will focus particularly on the research that is used to authorise them. This will take us to an assessment of the state of the research field into domestic violence more generally, and some reflection on the differences and challenges within it, focussing particularly on feminist responses to the work of North American family violence researchers Murray Straus and Richard Gelles, and controversies over their use of the Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS) to research domestic violence. We will then explore some of the broader differences between feminist understandings of domestic violence on the one hand, and family violence perspectives on the other.

The discussion concludes by suggesting that, while it is not possible or desirable to smooth out all controversial differences between the two approaches, they can play off each another more productively than has happened to date. In the process this raises some difficult and thought-provoking questions for feminists working against domestic violence. However it also clears a space for legitimising the experiences of men as victims,