

## Why Do Women Use Force or Violence in Intimate Partner Relationships?

Women are five times more likely than men to be victimized by a spouse or partner, ex-partner, boyfriend, or girlfriend. However, women who use force or violence within the confines of an intimate partner relationship can be seen as either a victim or an aggressor. As a victim, women who use force or violence are typically resisting, reacting or defending against abuse from a partner in the relationship, but a woman may also be the perpetrator of abuse. Women tend to initiate or to use physical assault because they are motivated by a need for self-protection or justice of previous continued assaults by their partner.

The use of violence by women may be directly correlated to lack of knowledge or access to other resources or networks of support. Absent a viable alternative to the use of force, a woman may believe that violence is her only means of self-protection. The majority of women who use force or violence against an intimate partner are battered women that are not safe. Society's propensity to glamorize or to ignore violence in all its many forms perpetuates a culture of dominance and brutality. Women's reactions to this societal norm is understandable as they are simply conforming to their environment. A fundamental question that must be examined is, "who is doing what to whom and with what impact?"

Though we acknowledge that women can be violent in relationships, research reveals the distinctive differences in women's motivations, intent, and impact for their use of force.

- Use of force refers to physically, verbally, and emotionally detrimental behaviors used toward an intimate partner to gain short-term control of chaotic, abusive and/or battering situations.<sup>1</sup>
- Battering, in contrast, signifies a pattern of coercive control, intimidation, and oppression effectively used to instill fear and maintain long term relationship domination.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, the question is not whether women have the potential to be abusive but whether their violence toward heterosexual partners is comparable to men's in terms of context, motivation, results, and consequences.<sup>3</sup>

- Various researchers studying women's violent behavior toward intimate partners have asserted that women's main motivation is self-defense. Many have found that women who use physical force against intimate partners are battered women themselves and strike out to stop attacks on themselves and/or to escape such attacks.<sup>4</sup>
- A number of other studies point to a medley of reasons for battered women's assaultive behavior that ranges from retaliating or punishing for past hurt to gaining emotional attention, expressing anger, and reacting to frustration as well as stress (Bachman & Carmody, 1994; Dasgupta, 1999; Faith, 1993; Fiebert & Gonzalez, 1997; Follingstad, Wright, & Sebastian, 1991; Gonzalez, 1997; Hamberger et al., 1994, 1997; Lillja, 1995; Straus, 1999). Taken individually, the majority of these reasons would not generally meet the standards of legal or social approval as they are not executed in self-defense.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Dasgupta, Shamita D. (2002) A Framework for Understanding Women's Use of Nonlethal Violence in Intimate Heterosexual Relationships, *8 VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN* 1364, 1378; House, Erin H. (2001) 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, *DOMESTIC VIOLENCE PROJECT/PROJECT SAFE*; Larence, Lisa Y. (2006) Serving Women Who Use Force in their Intimate Heterosexual Relationships, *12 VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN* 622, 625; Miller, supra note 4; Osthoff, Sue. (2002) But Gertrude, I Beg to Differ, A Hit is Not a Hit, is Not a Hit, *8 VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN* 1521.

<sup>2</sup> Pence, Ellen & Dasgupta, Shamita D. (2006) Re-Examining 'Battering': Are All Acts of Violence Against Intimate Partners the Same? *Praxis International* retrieved from [http://www.praxisinternational.org/files/praxis/files/Reexamining\\_Battering.pdf](http://www.praxisinternational.org/files/praxis/files/Reexamining_Battering.pdf); Schechter, Susan. (1992) *The Visions And Struggles Of The Battered Women's Movement*, Boston Press; Stark, Evan. (2007) *Coercive Control: How Men Entrap Women In Personal Life*. Oxford University Press.

<sup>3</sup> Dasgupta, Shamita D. (2002) A Framework for Understanding Women's Use of Nonlethal Violence in Intimate Heterosexual Relationships. *8 VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN* 1364, 1378.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

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Domestic violence by women and men show distinctly different patterns.

- 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.<sup>6</sup>
- 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.<sup>7</sup>
- Men tend to identify control or punishment as the primary motivations for assaults on their partners.<sup>8</sup>
- If a woman is hurting a man, the violence usually ends when the relationship ends.<sup>9</sup>
- If a man is hurting a woman, the violence generally escalates and becomes most dangerous when the relationship ends and in subsequent years.<sup>10</sup>
- Women who use violence against an intimate partner in self-defense are those with the fewest other options for addressing the abuse against them.<sup>11</sup>

Men use power, control, and force in order to intimidate and instill fear in their partners for long-term relationship control. Women's motivations for using force include: the desire to defend their self-respect against their partners' verbal and/or emotional attacks; to defend their children; a refusal to be victimized again; being passive did not work so maybe using violence will; and to gain short-term control over a chaotic/ abusive situation. By using force, these women have not successfully controlled their partners' behaviors. Instead, their use of force has put the women at increased risk of physical injury and escalated the violence against them.<sup>12</sup>

Domestic violence happens in same sex relationships at about the same rate as in heterosexual relationships. The National Coalition of Anti-Violence programs conducted a 10-year study in 10 U.S. cities which documented domestic violence at a rate between 25-33% in same sex relationships. A 1991 study found that 46% of the women responding had experienced 2 or more incidents of physical violence in their relationship.<sup>13</sup>

- 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.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Worcester, Nancy. (2002) Women's Use of Force: Complexities and Challenges of Taking the Issue Seriously. *VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN* 1390  
DOI:10.1177/107780102762478055.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

<sup>10</sup> Ibid

<sup>11</sup> Goodmark, Leigh. (2008) When Is a Battered Woman Not a Battered Woman? When She Fights Back. *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism*.

<sup>12</sup> Larance, Lisa Young. MSW, LCSW, LMSW. When She Hits Him: Why the Institutional Response Deserves Reconsideration. *Catholic Social Services of Washtenaw County*.

<sup>13</sup> Burk, Connie. Think, Re-think: Woman-to-woman domestic violence. Retrieved from <http://nwnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/Think-Re-think-Woman-to-Woman-DV.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup> Worcester, Nancy. (2002) Women's Use of Force: Complexities and Challenges of Taking the Issue Seriously. *VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN* (2002), 1390  
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