

Is There an Abuse in the Way Violence against Women is Defined and Measured?

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In 1980, the Canadian Council on the Status of Women sounded the alarm: one Canadian woman in ten was a victim of conjugal violence (husband or ex-husband) (MacLeod and Cadieux, 1980). Since then, we have witnessed the phenomenon of increasing incidents of violence against women and the much-debated reactions against these statistics or against the nature of violence assessed. Between 1980 and 1993, the statistical methods were refined. Attacks, often vicious, against doubtful methods or feminist biases from groups who have tried to measure the extent of violence against women are now concentrated on the definition adopted in the studies.

This article will briefly present the methods used in some pan-Canadian studies to survey violence against women and will underline the principal criticisms to which these studies gave rise. We will conclude by comparing the definition of violence used in the research described to the one generally conveyed in the media.

The definition and measurement of the problem

First, we will spend time on the methodology used in 1980 to estimate the rate of conjugal violence in Canada because this rate has been widely used in the past decade. Then, we will analyze the results of three recent pan-Canadian studies or inquiries on the different forms of violence against women.

One woman in ten is beaten by her partner (1980)

By the end of the 1970s, except for a very few partial, local studies, no national or provincial surveys had been conducted on the subject in Canada. Moreover, the number of women who had called resources (for help) after being assaulted by their partners was not known. Police services, courts, social services and hospitals were not compiling this type of information. Only women's shelters could provide statistics on battered women, the expression used at that time to describe women who were victims of violence inflicted by their partners.

In 1980, MacLeod and Cadieux carried out a study for the Canadian Council on the Status of Women in which the battered woman was defined as "one who is victim of physical or psychological violence from a husband or lover (man or woman) who shares her life, a violence to which the woman does not consent and that customs, laws and attitudes prevailing in society in which it is exercised excuse directly or indirectly." The study estimated the number of battered women by combining the number of battered women in shelters in 1978 and the number of divorce proceedings on the grounds of physical cruelty in the same year. The authors extrapolated that approximately one woman in 100 had been beaten and had access to a shelter or had asked for a divorce on the grounds of physical cruelty. Certain analyses done by Handleman and Ward (1976) lead us to believe that for each known case of wife battering there are ten cases which are not declared. This proportion applied to previous calculations allows us to estimate that each year there is one battered woman in ten in Canada.

According to the authors, this method does not constitute a sound basis on which to determine the rate of women battered by their partners in Canada. However, these estimates are conservative if we compare them to the results of an American national study done by Straus (1980). Subsequent studies, particularly those done by Statistics Canada (1993), which we will discuss later on, confirm these figures. Despite numerous criticisms of the approximate nature of the estimates, this rate of one in ten has often been used to illustrate the extent of conjugal violence in the statements of government policies and in many studies on the subject.

Violence toward post-secondary female students (1993)

In February 1993, two sociologists from Carleton University released the results of a study, conducted in Canadian universities and colleges, on violence experienced by women students in their (love) relationships and during dates. (DeKeseredy and Kelly, 1993).

From a probability sampling (regions, categories of post-secondary institutions, programs, classes) 1,835 women and 1,307 men volunteered to answer a questionnaire in class in the presence of an interviewer. In this study, abuse against women was described as any intentional physical, sexual or psychological aggression toward a woman by her male partner. Physical and psychological violence were measured with an instrument called the Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus and Gelles, 1986) that was slightly expanded by the authors to widen the measurement of psychological abuse. The different forms of sexual aggression were measured with a slightly modified version of the Sexual Experience Survey (Koss et al., 1987). These two instruments, validated in the United States, have been widely used, especially in American and also in several Canadian studies.

The results of this study indicate that during the previous year, more than a quarter (28,8%) of Canadian women in college or university had experienced at least one form of sexual abuse, nearly a quarter of them (22,4%) had experienced one form of physical abuse and more than three quarters (79%) some psychological abuse. Rates are obviously higher when considering women who have finished College: 45% of them had been victims of sexual abuse, 34,9% of physical abuse and 85% of psychological abuse.

The publication of these results provoked a flood of protests in the media. The authors as well as anyone who denounces violence against women were accused of making real violence commonplace by putting everything on an equal footing. People started being ironical about the dangers threatening girls on campus; they began considering the psychological abuse as sexual abuse. Some people even said that it was a new inquisition!

The Canadian Committee on Violence Against Women (1993)

A few months later, in the summer of 1993, the report of the Canadian Committee on Violence Against Women was given a bad reception. Created in 1991 by the federal government, this national committee had to "sum up all forms of violence toward women and to draw up a plan of action taking into account the factors that contribute to the vulnerability of women" (Canadian Committee on Violence Against Women, 1993, Annex B, p. B2).

At the beginning of the report, the committee defines violence and stresses the fact that "violence must be seen as a chain of events going from insults to blows, indeed to murders" (Canadian Committee on Violence Against Women, 1993 p.3). For the committee, the term violence can include physical, sexual, psychological, financial and spiritual abuse. These five different aspects of violence can surface either progressively, in a combined way or in one form only.

After having heard thousands of people in 139 communities, received 800 reports and carried out about 20 studies on specific themes, the committee describes the situation of violence against Canadian women. It proposes a national plan of action and formulates more than 400 recommendations. It also confirms the extent of the problem and explores the multiple aspects of violence against women from three angles: the forms or dimensions of violence, the specific populations and the institutions.

On the whole, this report was strongly criticized. Many women's groups which had denounced the existence of the committee and had asked that funds be invested in some action instead, obviously affirmed that the Canadian Committee on Violence Against Women revealed nothing new. The media concentrated their criticisms on a study called Women's Security Project, a small portion of the report; the main results can be found on only two of the 318 pages reserved for the description of the situation.

We will briefly summarize this study because of the importance the media attached to it. It carried out detailed personal interviews with a random sample of 420 Toronto women aged 18 to 64, a sample based on a list of all the house addresses of the city. However, the description of the methodology neither indicates the size of the sample that was necessary to obtain these 420 respondents for the study nor the limits of the representativeness of the sample. Nevertheless, some information on the respondents (citizenship, place of birth, ethnic and cultural identification, age, academic level, disability) is provided and would allow the evaluation of its representativeness with regard to all women in Toronto. Women with a university diploma represent 46.5% of respondents, which indicates, in all probability, that most educated women accepted to participate in the study.

The aim of this study was to obtain better knowledge of the prevalence, the nature and the effects of sexual violence inflicted on women before they had reached the age of 16 as well as the effects of sexual and physical violence within intimate relationships. The terms used in the interviews and in the presentation of the results are explicitly defined. The results were no surprise to people working in intervention or in research in the field of violence against women. However, they made several journalists extremely angry and caused consternation and cynicism amongst the population. Among other things, the study revealed that 54% of respondents had had some form of unwanted sexual experience before the age of 16 (24% of the declared incidents concerned attempts of or forced sexual intercourse), 51% had been victims of attempted rape or rape (since the age of 16), and 27% had been victims of physical violence in their intimate relationships.

Let us recall that this study, which contributed greatly to discredit the report of the Canadian Committee on Violence Against Women, is only a small portion of the information and the testimonies contained in this report.

Statistic Canada survey (1993)

The first results of the Statistics Canada Survey were to contribute, at least in part, to restoring the reputation of the report of the Canadian Committee on Violence Against Women. Published in *Le Quotidien* on November 18, 1993, these long-awaited results, were about physical and sexual violence and were limited to acts corresponding to the definition of aggression in the Canadian Criminal Code.

During this study, 12,300 women 18 years of age and over were questioned about acts of physical and sexual violence inflicted on them by men and about their perception of their own personal safety. All in all, 19,000 households were contacted (12,300 phone interviews), representing a response rate of 64%. It is interesting to mention that the response rate was 91% for 13,500 households where a woman aged 18 could be reached.

The study, for which results can be generalized for all Canadian women, revealed that half of them (51%) had been victims of at least one act of physical or sexual violence by the age of 16. In most cases, the victims knew the aggressor (45% of the respondents). As for most Canadian women, 25% had been the victims of physical or sexual violence inflicted by their partners or ex-partners. If we consider only women presently married or living with a partner, nearly one woman in six (15%) had already been assaulted by her partner. Then, if we consider only women who had been married or had lived with a partner, we observed an alarming rate (47%) who declared having been assaulted by a previous partner. The Statistics Canada report puts forward three hypotheses that seem plausible to explain this important difference between married and separated women: it is more difficult for married women to declare the violence they are experiencing, break-ups constitute an increased risk of violence, numerous separations result in the intensification of violence.

When considering only the 12 months prior to the study, 10% of women experienced acts of violence. The highest rates for this 12-month period applied to younger women: 27% for those 18 to 24, and 14% for those 25 to 34. In terms of income, rates were 11% for women with a household income of less than 15 000\$ to 29 999\$ and 10% with an income of 60 000\$ or more. Concerning education, women who had not finished their post-secondary education (including first year of university) were the most affected (12%). This fact is particularly alarming if we consider that women 18 to 24 experienced, during the previous year, rates of violence three times higher than women in general (27% versus 10%).

These results gave rise to consternation but were generally not contested because of the credibility of Statistics Canada. However, while everyone hoped that these results would put an end to the debate on statistics, people contested the acts which were considered violent in the study and said that Statistics Canada went too far. For instance, they said that acts like being pushed, grabbed, or jostled happened to everyone, perhaps more to men than women, and that calling this violence was making the problem commonplace. Because it was hard to question the figures, the debate on the extent and the nature of violence moved to the definitions.

The concept of violence

What distinguishes the definition of violence used in the studies already mentioned from the popular definition of violence? It would appear that there are two different views of the problem for which a solution must be sought.

In these studies, the terms "violence", "aggression" and "abuse" are often interchangeable. They always include either the notion of domination or the notion of constraint. This idea of domination or constraint is ever-present in the studies which analyse violence against women. We will therefore consider violence in all cases as a situation where someone tries to impose his or her will on someone else either by means of physical force, verbal threat or humiliation, etc. From this viewpoint, the various forms of violence constitute a single continuum, introducing an aspect of continuity in the transition from one form to another. Thus, one form of violence can lead to another or several forms of violence can coexist. Many empirical observations showed that physical violence is often preceded and accompanied by psychological and sexual violence.

The popular notion/definition of the term "violence" seems to be associated only with brutality, physical force or exceptional behaviour. Consequently, only extreme behaviours, that is, acts that are likely to severely undermine the physical and sexual integrity of a person, are described as violent behaviours. Therefore, people would think it an exaggeration to consider minor assaults such as pushing, grabbing or jostling violent, even if they disapprove of this type of behaviour. People do not want to use the term "violence" because, on one hand, the threat to physical integrity is not very serious, and, on the other hand, these behaviours happen so frequently that people consider them a part of normal life. Moreover, it would seem exaggerated to describe as violent some imposed sexual behaviours such as stolen kisses which we consider harmless, frequent and which do not have tragic consequences. People would not describe them as physical violence because they perceive an important difference between the nature and the consequences of these acts and the nature and consequences of actual rape.

Two analyses of violence

Here we are confronted with two mainly irreconcilable interpretations of reality. The first considers the use of physical force not as a loss of control but rather as a means of dominating another (others). From this viewpoint, threats to someone's psychological integrity come from the same attitude as the behaviours that undermine or risk to undermine his or her integrity because they serve the same purposes. In this concept of violence, psychological abuse (humiliation, scorn, intimidation, etc.) is often judged more destructive than physical blows. On the other hand, some do not want to confuse trifles with real problems which generally are limited to manifestations of physical force (assaults or sexual attacks) likely to undermine a victim's physical or sexual integrity. Frequent manifestations of aggression which do not seriously harm others (eg. pushing, grabbing, jostling) are considered part of everyday life. Physical abuse is considered a loss of control, a manifestation of frustration and even a normal expression of tension, only reprehensible in so far as it severely undermines or risks undermining physical integrity.

Two types of solutions

These two analyses of violence lead to different solutions. The problem of violence described as a multifaceted phenomenon (one where someone imposes his/her will on another) can be dealt with by eliminating the inequalities between men and women, by increasing mutual respect and by having individuals take responsibility for their behaviour. On the other hand, the problem of physical violence can be dealt with through prevention aimed at controlling aggression internally and externally: by channeling aggression, by dissuading aggressors by severely punishing offenders, by advising potential victims to be careful by not provoking anyone who might lose control, etc.

Conclusion

The questions raised about the relevance of considering behaviours judged commonplace and without serious consequences as violent show us to what extent tolerance is great toward the use of physical force in our daily relationships. In this context of tolerance, behaviours aimed at humiliating cannot be considered a manifestation of violence, all the more so since they happen in family and conjugal intimacy. Moreover, what can be said about the frequent constraints imposed in sexual relations, whether it be during an occasional date or a long-term relationship? The domain of relations between the members of a single family and the domain of sexuality appear in fact as places where content is particularly hard to identify (Stoddart, 1993). While psychological, historical, social and political factors contribute to the explanation of this resistance to recognizing violence in family and intimate relationships, social and political pressures coming particularly from the feminist analysis of social behaviour provoke a new interpretation of reality.

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