



**Naming the Violence:
The Gendered Aspect of Violence Against Women
A CCWS Tool**

Background

There are over fifty coordination initiatives across BC that have been formed to address violence (for more on CCWS and coordination, see Profile below). One of the challenges that these coordination initiatives often deal with is how to define the violence that they are working against.

Many initiatives state that their mandate is to respond to “violence against women,” but other initiatives have been reluctant to use this term. They have chosen to use gender neutral, non-specific terms like “violence” or “family violence.”

Some of their reluctance to use “violence against women” comes from a desire to have a broader mandate than “simply” violence against women. However, in many cases there is resistance to specifying that in cases of intimate violence, most victims are women and most assailants are men.

We at Community Coordination for Women’s Safety believe that it is important to use the term “violence against women” when talking about relationship violence, sexual assault, stalking or other forms of intimate violence.

This document looks at the resistance to gender-specific language and offers background materials and discussion points for coordination initiatives that are dealing with this issue.

The Importance of Discussing Gender and Violence

Discussions about the nature of violence can be difficult, due to strongly held beliefs on all sides.

I recall the meeting where the name for our group was generated; there never was another time when our beliefs and expectations were so exposed. Those of us who were frontline service delivery/feminist based folks saw the value in calling ourselves a VAWIR committee while others saw the use of violence as broader, relevant not just to women but to children and men as well.—Email from Coordination Chair

We went through a brainstorming exercise to develop a vision statement. "Family" and "community" came up a bit, but we were all pretty realistic that the initiative had to have a specific focus if we were to make a difference. We decide to follow the example of the provincial initiative and named ourselves "Robson Valley Community Coordination for Women's Safety Initiative."—Email from Coordination Chair

Those who work within their own sectors often have (or assume they have) shared philosophy about violence against women: what violence is and what will make women safest. One of the most stressful aspects of entering into a partnership is wondering about the other partner's philosophy and commitment to end violence. One partner may be committed to ending violence against women, while the other is committed to improving a particular sector's response to incidents of violence against women.—*Building Partnerships to End Violence Against Women: A Practical Guide*, CCWS Project, 2005

Discussions about the nature of violence can be an important part of moving the work of your initiative forward. Being specific about the violence you are addressing can:

- Focus the work of the initiative
- Highlight the common goals of members
- Present a clear image of the initiative to non-members
- Raise awareness of violence and challenge acceptance of violence in your community

These discussions can take place in a number of ways:

What we have found in our research is that there needs to be a balance between ensuring a shared philosophy before beginning to work together AND allowing the partners to work through differences without letting this delay or stop the work. Some philosophical differences can be discussed and worked out

more easily in the context of a specific task. For example, partners may have a philosophical discussion in which both agree that violence against women is wrong and it seems that there are no significant differences. However, key philosophical differences might come out in a specific discussion about how exactly the partnership will keep women safe. Or, on the other hand, it might be that partners have a philosophical discussion in which they seem polarized as “feminist activists” and “systems personnel,” but when they have a strategy session about a particular task it becomes clear that both partners would approach the task in the same way and can actually work well together on a practical level.—*Building Partnerships to End Violence Against Women: A Practical Guide*, CCWS Project, 2005

Resistance to Using “Violence Against Women”

Here we have listed some of the more common arguments against gender specific labelling of violence and offered some counterarguments.

Reason #1: “Men experience violence at the same rate as women.”

We oppose all violence, against anyone—women, children and men. However, not specifying the gender of assailants and victims can easily give the impression that men and women are victims of violence at the same rate. This is not the case. The overwhelming majority of assailants in all cases of violence are men, and in cases of intimate violence—violence in relationships, sexual assault, stalking, abduction, spousal homicide—women are overwhelmingly the victims.

Some studies have seemed to indicate that women and men experience similar rates of physical violence and emotional abuse in their relationships. These studies tend to count individual incidents of violence without considering the broader context of the relationship dynamics. If the numbers in these surveys are considered on their own, then it may appear that men are just as likely to be victims. However, if the different types of violence and their impact are examined, it is clear that women are at much greater risk.

For example, the 1999 and 2004 General Social Surveys by Statistics Canada suggested similar rates of violence for women and men. However, on closer examination it can be seen that “the violence experienced by women is more severe and more often repeated than violence directed at men” (Department of Justice Fact Sheet on Spousal Abuse 2006):

According to the fact sheet women were

- Six times more likely than men to report being sexually assaulted
- Five times more likely to require medical attention as a result of assault
- Three times more likely to be physically injured

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- Almost twice as likely to report being threatened with or having a gun or knife used against them
 - Much more likely to fear for their lives or the lives of their children

Homicide data reveals that women are at higher risk of being killed by their partners. In the past two decades, three times as many wives were killed by their husbands as husbands killed by wives.

Although both women and men experience spousal abuse, the nature and severity of the spousal violence suffered by women is much worse, with the result that spousal abuse remains predominantly an issue of male violence against women.—*Spousal Abuse Policies and Legislation: Final Report of the Ad Hoc Federal-Provincial-Territorial Working Group Reviewing Spousal Abuse Policies and Legislation, 2003*

Uniform Crime Reporting Survey for 2000 data indicates that:

- Women represent about 85 per cent of victims who report spousal abuse to police, and men represent about 15 per cent of victims.
- This proportion has remained stable since 1995.

The World Health Organization Multi-Country Study on Women's Health and Domestic Violence Against Women (2005) found that:

- Violence by intimate partners is one of the most serious challenges to women's health and
- Women who are physically abused by a partner face a similar legacy of health problems whether they live in a modern city in the industrialized world or a traditional village in a developing country.

Why are women more likely to be abused than men? There are a number of factors, including:

- In many parts of the world there is a strong tradition of ignoring or condoning violence against women. This has even been enshrined in law.
- Most cultures, including the Judeo-Christian culture that informs Canadian society, historically favours men over women, and sees men as more rational and required to control emotional women. These societal beliefs are reflected in statements by batterers and victims.
- Often, it is unlikely that a man who batters his partner will face any legal or social repercussions, due to bias against women in the justice system and society at large, and a strong belief that violence against women is a private family matter.

Although research does show that boys who witness abuse in the home are seven times more likely to batter, many men who witnessed violence as children vow not to use violence and do not grow up to be batterers. A more consistent explanation for the relationship between witnessing and battering is that witnessing is one of many sources of information; men also receive information from the larger society that it is appropriate to control your wife and to enforce this control through violence. Further, as emphasized in batterers' intervention programs, boys who witnessed domestic violence and grew up to be batterers learned more than just violence; rather, they learned—and thus can unlearn—lessons about the respective roles of men and women that contribute to their abusive behavior as adults.—“Evolution of Theories of Violence,” Minnesota Advocates for Human Rights, 2006. Available at www.stopvaw.org/Evolution_of_Theories_of_Violence.html.

[Battering is] a logical outcome of relationships of dominance and inequality—relationships shaped not simply by the personal choices or desires of some men to [dominate] their wives but by how we, as a society, construct social and economic relationships between men and women and within marriage (or intimate domestic relationships) and families.—“Some Thoughts on Philosophy,” Ellen Pence, in *Coordinating Community Responses to Domestic Violence: Lessons from the Duluth Model*, Melanie Shepard & Ellen Pence, 1999).

Violence against women is more likely in contexts in which manhood is culturally defined as linked to dominance, toughness, or male honor (Heise, 1998:277). Where “being a man” involves aggressiveness, the repression of empathy and a sense of entitlement to power, those men who are violent are acting out the dictates of what it means to be a “normal” male. ...

Some men (and women) subscribe to the idea that male sexuality is an uncontrollable or barely controllable force (Hollway, 1984; Kippax, Crawford and Waldby, 1994:5318). Men have a sexual “drive” which can be set in motion by sexual stimulation in a primitive way and beyond conscious control. This notion has been used to deny, downplay or defend men’s sexual violence against women, and to place the burden of responsibility for rape with women. It is up to women not to “provoke” men... Such notions are related to a second gendered discourse of sexuality, the idea that women should be the gatekeepers and guardians of sexual safety, with responsibility for both their own and men’s sexual behaviour. -“Engaging Men: Strategies and Dilemmas in Violence Prevention Education Among Men,” Michael Flood, Centre for Women’s Studies, Australian National University. *Women Against Violence*: Issue 13 2002-2003.

Some argue that men are abused as often as women, but that statistics are skewed because men are less likely to report incidents of abuse. However, research has shown that this is not the case. In fact, studies suggest that men are more likely to report violence when it does occur. Arguing that men are less likely to report, or that the system is biased towards reports by women, ignores the reality of the social context that indirectly supports and promotes violence against women and children. This in turn leads to serious consequences, such as lack of support for programs that serve abused women or help abusive men to change their behaviour.

The RCMP are citing more incidents of responding to domestics involving the woman as the primary aggressor. There is growing use of the short-cut VIR instead of VAWIR among the agencies here. At the committee meetings, we've arrived at a consensus that the VAWIR Committee's focus is on family violence, and we keep the discussion alive and "un-solved" regarding which is more important/relevant/accurate, etc. Any relationship violence in a family, home, school, or community is unacceptable, and we can agree upon this. We can agree that women and children are usually the victims. We keep the name VAWIR, and for some, it is with grudging agreement. -Email from Coordination Chair

In my experience, I have only heard of a few cases where the woman became abusive. In these cases the man had a disability or was older than her. I have heard from other organizations and workers that women are also abusive and that it needs to be addressed. Women worked hard to have their own support network and to create women's organizations. If we go back to calling it "family violence," in my opinion we are going backwards. Having said that, I also believe that men should be given the responsibility of [changing] their abusive behavior by ordering them to go to programs and by giving them funding. They need to create organizations that educate and support men. Their violence needs to be addressed in a supportive way so they may change.—Email from Community-Based Support Worker

Reason #2: "We don't want to be anti-male."

There may be fears within coordination initiatives that "violence against women" is too feminist a term, that it will alienate potential community partners. Others may fear that a focus on violence against women is "anti-male." It can be helpful in these cases to look at projects across the province (and around the world) in which men and women are working together to respond to violence against women (see our guide, *Building Partnerships to End Violence Against Women*, for examples of projects across BC). Men who do not necessarily identify as feminists still witness the reality of violence—e.g. male police officers who know that most domestic assaults are men assaulting

women, or male counsellors of abusive men who work from the premise that violence is based in societal oppression of women.

It is totally possible for projects to acknowledge that most perpetrators of violence are men and at the same time welcome men into the project as essential partners in finding a solution. One example of such a balance is the “social norms” approach to violence prevention education. Social norms projects focus on showing participants that assumptions about what most people think (i.e. social norms) are often wrong.

Social norms research suggests that most males are mistaken about other males’ attitudes and behaviours towards sex. Similarly, most males are uncomfortable with violence against women, and with the attitudes, behaviors, and language of men who commit such violence... However, men do not act on our beliefs or express our discomfort because we falsely think that other men do not feel the same.—“The Social Norms Approach to Violence Prevention,” Alan D Berkowitz.

Social norms projects that focus on intimate violence start out by working with men to determine what their real feelings are about violence. This information is then used to encourage men to speak out against violence, knowing that most other men will agree with them.

Reason #3: “Violence against women” excludes survivors of same-sex abuse

Some have suggested that gender-neutral language is more inclusive of women who have been battered by female partners or men who have been battered by male partners. Yet in fact this just blurs the distinctions between the experiences of heterosexual survivors and gay or lesbian survivors. It also, again, serves to erase the reality that in the big picture, most assailants are men, and that in heterosexual relationships, men are almost always the assailants.

Reason #4: All members of the family are responsible in some way for any violence that occurs within the family.

Many counsellors and therapists have been trained to use a “family systems” approach that sees violence as resulting from a dysfunctional relationship. In this model, both the abuser and the victim are responsible for the violence. This approach has been widely critiqued for not placing full responsibility for the violence on the abuser. When this approach is combined with beliefs that women seek out or provoke violence, or that women are responsible for keeping the peace in the family, the result is often that women are blamed for

the abuse they experience. It might be acknowledged that men commit more violence, but women are blamed for causing it.

More Considerations

Aboriginal Women

Many Aboriginal Canadian women have questioned the prioritizing of gender in discussions of violence. There are a range of varying perspectives among Aboriginal women. Here are some words from one scholar and activist, Patricia Monture-Angus (from *Thunder In My Soul: A Mohawk Woman Speaks*, 1995).

[I]t seems to make little sense to report on the incomplete statistical evidence that documents that eight of ten Aboriginal women currently live in situations of overt physical violence—the violence of their male partners (Ontario Native Women’s Association 1989: 18). Focusing on a moment in time or incidents of violence, abuse or racism, counting them—disguises the utter totality of the experience of violence in Aboriginal women’s lives. This distinguishes Aboriginal women from the organizing-against-violence and political action that often occurs in the women’s movement. Organizing against a single form of violence—men’s—is not a “luxury” I have experienced.

We know little about the reasons for the silence that surrounds the issue of violence in Aboriginal communities. It is easy to note the gendered nature of the relationship and blame the pervading silence on patriarchy. I think this answer is too simple. Violence against women must be understood as just one of the many challenges Aboriginal communities face. These community crises include: substance abuse among our youth, inadequate housing, poverty and starvation, alcoholism, suicides and attempted suicides. There are so many crises in our communities requiring the attention of Aboriginal leaders and politicians. When your life is always lived on crisis mode, it is difficult to sit down and prioritize your activities. Are the consequences of violence against women more severe than poverty and alcoholism? At least some of the failure to address issues of abuse in Aboriginal communities is a failure to resource communities in a way that they can address the multiple crises they face.

Current thought must recognize that Aboriginal women do not fully share the history of legally sanctioned violence against women with Canadian women. Violence and abuse (including political exclusion) against women was not tolerated in most Aboriginal societies. This is rarely incorporated in feminist analysis or the principles of the women’s movement. This is an example of where colonialism must be incorporated in feminist analysis.

The state is fully implicated in the violence that exists in Indian communities today. The state constructed the Indian Act and saw to its implementation, which has continuously stripped Indian women and our children of basic rights such as citizenship. In the 1876 Indian Act, women were entitled to be registered based either on their marriage to an Indian man or because of their birth to an Indian man. Women were men's property. This was not an Aboriginal tradition.

Ideas for Facilitating A Discussion At Your Initiative

Because violence against women is such a complex social issue it is imperative that people find some common ground in understanding before working together to address it. Members of a coordination initiative may come from very different paradigms of experience and understanding about the root causes of violence against women and the strategies for addressing it. Some members will have a gendered analysis, some will have a justice/law enforcement/crime prevention analysis, some an addictions analysis, others a population health analysis. All of these (and many other) perspectives are valid and if room is made for all these ideas to be part of solutions, the resulting change will be more inclusive and holistic and ultimately, *more* women will be safer.

All of us who bring these different worldviews come from places of responsibility and concern for our role in addressing violence against women. The CCWS Finding Common Ground Exercise is one method of creating a dialogue in which a group can develop a set of beliefs in common about violence against women. The exercise has been used in small and large multi-disciplinary groups and each time has been a way of making transparent and gently mediating differences. It is a good exercise to be used before developing a Mission Statement or a new partnership initiative. (See the CCWS website to download this exercise.)

For me, the most affirming message for maintaining the words "violence AGAINST WOMEN" came from the Stephen Lewis "Race Against Time" Massey Lectures. While Stephen Lewis is passionate about ending AIDS in Africa, if he had the opportunity to start over again to end this pandemic, he said that he would be working for equality for women. This, he maintains, is at the core and heart of every social ill we have. His voice gives me confidence. I want to keep WOMEN at the centre of our coordination initiative. AND I'm committed to keeping the conversation alive, as the rub of ideas polishes the jewel that is the Work.—Coordination Chair

Resources

Domestic Violence Handbook for Police and Crown Prosecutors in Alberta. Alberta Justice Communications. 2005. Online at www.justice.gov.ab.ca.

Towards an understanding of women's use of non-lethal violence in intimate heterosexual relationships. Written by Shamita Das Dasgupta for the VAWnet Applied Research Forum, 2001. Retrieved from www.vaw.umn.edu/documents/vawnet/towards/towards.html. Link on CCWS website.

Measures of Empowerment for Women Who Are Victims of Violence and Who Use the Justice System, by Mary Russell. Prepared for Victim Services Division, Ministry of Attorney General, BC, 2001.

Contact Victim Service Division at 604-660-5199 or VSDVictimsServices@gems2.gov.bc.ca for a copy, or contact Gisela at the number or email below.

Claims About Husband Battering, by Michael Flood. First published in the Melbourne Domestic Violence and Incest Resource Centre Newsletter, Summer 1999. Available at www.xyonline.net/husbandbattering.shtml.

Advocating for Domestic Violence Victims Who Have Been Arrested for Domestic Violence, by Marie De Santis. Available on the website of the Women's Justice Centre in Santa Rosa, California: www.justicewomen.com/tips_dv_victims.html.

When Women Use Force, Erin House. Available at www.praxisinternational.org/library_frame.html.

Spousal Abuse Policies and Legislation: Final Report of the Ad Hoc Federal Provincial Territorial Working Group Reviewing Spousal Abuse Policies and Legislation, April 2003. This report has a section in incidence of violence in relationships which deals with statistics around dual arrest. Available at <http://canada.justice.gc.ca/en/ps/fm/reports/spousal.html#11>. Link on CCWS website.

Assessing Violence Against Women: A Statistical Profile prepared by Federal Provincial Territorial Ministers Responsible for the Status of Women, 2002. Available at www.swc-cfc.gc.ca/pubs/0662331664/200212-0662331664_e.html.

Uniform Crime Reporting Survey (UCR2), 2002. Available at www.statcan.ca

Spousal Abuse: A Fact Sheet from the Department of Justice Canada. Available at <http://canada.justice.gc.ca/en/ps/fm/spouseafs.html>

Family Violence in Canada: A Statistical Profile 2005. Available at http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/ncfv-cnivf/familyviolence/famvio_e.html

Stolen Sisters: A Human Rights Response to Discrimination and Violence Against Indigenous Women in Canada, 2004. Available at <http://www.amnesty.ca/campaigns/resources/amr2000304.pdf>

The World Health Organization Multi-Country Study on Women's Health and Domestic Violence Against Women, 2005. Available at http://www.who.int/gender/violence/who_multicountry_study/en/index.html

Dangerous Domains by Holly Johnson (Nelson Canada, 1996) has an excellent introduction which deals with statistical research.

Coordinating Community Responses to Domestic Violence: Lessons From Duluth and Beyond by Melanie Shepard and Ellen Pence (Corwin, 1999) has an excellent analysis of what constitutes "battering" and how this might be different than criminal law definitions of assault etc. Chapter 10 is most pertinent.

RCMP E Division Operational Manual Part 2- Criminal Code Offenses- Persons, Violence in Relationships Section 4 Primary Aggressor, Amended 2005-02-24

VAWIR E Division Training Bulletin which deals specifically with defenses of mutual battering. The Bulletin number is ON-308. Issued: 97-09-23.

(These two documents available in hard copy by contacting Gisela at the number or email below.)

United Nations Declaration on Violence Against Women, 1994. Available at [http://www.unhcr.ch/huridocda/huridoca.nsf/\(symbol\)/A.RES.48.104.En?opendocument](http://www.unhcr.ch/huridocda/huridoca.nsf/(symbol)/A.RES.48.104.En?opendocument)

"Controversy, Constraints, and Context: Understanding Family Violence Through Family Systems Theory," Christine E Murray, *The Family Journal* 14:3, July 2006.

Profile of the Community Coordination for Women's Safety Program

CCWS Program Mandate

Community Coordination for Women's Safety works with emergency responders in rural and isolated communities, and at the provincial and national level, to support the development of an integrated, coordinated response to gender-based violence. The CCWS program includes a Provincial Working Group made up of senior police and RCMP members, provincial and federal justice officials, major provincial non-profit organizations and members of the civil and criminal bar. It also includes members who represent women with disabilities, Aboriginal women and immigrant and refugee women. Working Group members provide technical expertise and liaison between their sector and the project. Specific local or regional concerns that have broader implications are also considered by the Working Group.

Managing Partner: BCASVACP

The BC Association of Specialized Victim Assistance and Counselling Programs (BCASVACP) provides support and training to over 150 anti-violence programs across BC—Community Based Victim Assistance Programs, Stopping the Violence Counselling Programs and Sexual Assault Centres. The mandate of the BCASVACP is to provide support and training, undertake research, conduct analysis of policy and legislation, develop and distribute resources and tools, educate the public (including government bodies) on the needs of victims of violence, develop and maintain standards for the provision of service and work to foster the development of relevant intersectoral initiatives across BC.

History of The Community Coordination for Women's Safety Program

Since the 1990s, the BCASVACP has played a leadership role in supporting coordination initiatives at the local and provincial level. In 2001 the Association was successful in developing and launching Community Coordination for Women's Safety (CCWS). The project supports coordination initiatives in rural and isolated communities and women who are marginalized within those communities. This multi-faceted, intersectoral pilot has worked effectively throughout BC, developing tools, training and other supports to enhance coordination and has developed a solutions focused, action oriented model to mitigate barriers to women's safety at the provincial level.

The networking and information have been great and you are a resource to consult when issues arise. As a result, I have used confidentiality and member responsibility templates, protocol templates and have contacted Morgen, Gail and Gisela regarding issues with clients or with other VAWIR committees. **The benefit of having a central**

provincial resource on [coordination] cannot be emphasized enough. –Participant in CCWS Program

The CCWS Program has been supported by:

- The Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General The BC Law Foundation
- The National Victims Policy Centre
- The National Crime Prevention Program
- The Ministry of Community, Aboriginal and Women's Services (now the Ministry of Community Services)

In 2005 CCWS received ongoing core funding from the Ministry of Community Services. BC now has over 50 local coordination initiatives. These include local Violence Against Women in Relationships (VAWIR) Committees and other locally developed approaches. They involve representatives from a cross-section of community-based and system-based agencies addressing violence against women.

CONTACT US

The Community Coordination for Women's Safety can be reached at 604-633-2506 ext. 15 or www.endingviolence.org, click on Community Coordination for Women's Safety.