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# *A Framework for Understanding Women's Use of Nonlethal Violence in Intimate Heterosexual Relationships*

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*Manavi, Inc.*

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*This article reviews current research on domestic violence by women and attempts to answer two questions: (a) Are women who assault their heterosexual partners different from male batterers? If so, (b) how are they different from male batterers? Pertinent studies have been categorized as research promoting gender symmetry of intimate abuse, research claiming women's violence toward abusive male partners as self-defense and/or retaliatory action, and research focusing on multiple corollaries of women's violence. The ecological nested model is recommended for research, so the full context is taken into account to understand women's use of violence.*

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*From its inception, the anti-domestic violence movement in the United States has been shaped by the recognition that abuse of women is prevalent in families, especially by male intimate partners. In the past 25 years, battered women and their advocates have worked tirelessly to move domestic violence from a private matter to the public discourse. The proliferation of agencies, research, grant monies, policy making, and media attention on the topic indicates the considerable success of this endeavor.*

A significant activity in anti-domestic violence work has centered on holding the state accountable for women's safety. To this end, the anti-domestic violence movement has paid special attention to modifying the criminal justice system, as it can play a critical role in the lives of women experiencing abuse in their homes. To prevent the legal system from minimizing the abuse of women

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within their families, anti-domestic violence advocates have sought to develop policies and programs to protect women to the utmost and hold abusers accountable. For those who turn to the criminal justice system for protection, arrest is often the first step in evoking the formidable powers of a governmental system to stop perpetrators from further abusing victims. Similarly, mandatory arrest policies formulated to ensure uniformity of responses by the criminal justice system in domestic violence situations are another illustration of this effort to protect women.

Mandatory arrest policies were instituted to remove discretion to arrest from law enforcement officers, who may be the first to arrive at domestic violence scenes. Under the auspices of these policies, police officers are required to arrest the aggressors to maximize victims' safety. In addition, as a part of nonjudicial preventive actions, various batterers' programs were established around the country to encourage reeducation of abusers into gender egalitarianism.<sup>1</sup> As an alternative to incarcerating abusers, the criminal justice system has been using these programs routinely with the goal of transforming men who batter.

Since the 1990s, the anti-domestic violence movement has been confronted with an extraordinary twist of circumstances. Advocates and practitioners around the country have begun to notice an increase in dual arrests (Martin, 1997; Miller, 2001) as well as arrests of women only for domestic assault. For example, family violence data from Connecticut indicate a steady rise in arrests of women between 1987 and 1997. In 1997, 18% of women were arrested on domestic violence charges in Connecticut compared with 11% in 1987 (State of Connecticut, 1998). The "Summary of Family Violence Arrest Incidents in Connecticut, 1987-1997" (State of Connecticut, 1998) stated that "although the overwhelming majority of family violence victims are females, the number of male victims has grown by 21%; the percent of male victims increased from 16% of the total in 1987 to 21% of the total in 1997" (p. 13). Records from Boulder County, Colorado, reveal that in 1997, nearly 12% of domestic violence offenders were women compared with 14.2% in 1998 and nearly 25% in the first 6 months of 1999 (Boulder County Domestic Abuse Prevention Project, 1999). On the other hand, statistics from Lincoln and Lancaster County in Nebraska show a decline between 1996 and 1998 in dual as well as female-only arrest (Family Violence Council, 1998).<sup>2</sup>

Although reliable nationwide statistics on arrest rates are still unavailable and empirical data on the types of violence perpetrated by women are not clearly delineated, perceptions around the country are that the problem of women being arrested on domestic violence charges is significant.<sup>3</sup> Practitioners attending a seminar on women who use violence (Praxis International, Inc., 1999) claimed that during 1 year, the range of women arrested or charged with domestic violence–related offenses in their communities varied between 10% and 40%.<sup>4</sup> Representatives of nine organizations participating in this seminar unanimously declared they were quite concerned about the increase in the numbers of women arrested for domestic violence in their communities.

Such arrest reports have made advocates concerned about the appropriateness of law enforcement and judicial responses to women who have used violence against their heterosexual partners. Detractors of the anti–domestic violence movement have hailed these arrests as proof of the gender parity of family violence (see “Backlash,” 2000). They maintain that feminists alleging gender specificity of family violence have promoted antimale attitudes in society, which have resulted in wide injustices toward men. Newspaper reports (Burroughs, 1999; Young, 1995), books (Cook, 1997; Pearson, 1997; Sikes, 1997), as well as television news and talk shows (e.g., “Battered by Their Wives” on *20/20*, ABC, 1997; “Wives Who Abuse Their Husbands” on *Oprah*, ABC, 1999) have capitalized on the issue of women as perpetrators of domestic violence.

Confounded by this unprecedented high arrest rate of women, law enforcement, judiciary, and anti–domestic violence practitioners have been seeking appropriate responses to women charged with domestic violence. Often, based on the purported gender fairness of the justice system, the judiciary and prosecutors have viewed the established “batterer’s treatment programs” as legitimate methods of dealing with women arrested for using violence against their male partners. Even the popular emerging rhetoric has marked women thus arrested as “women batterers.”<sup>5</sup>

#### A DISTINCTION IN DEFINITION

Although some domestic violence practitioners believe that sending women who have “abused” their partners to batterer’s

programs is a valid way of treating them, many others disagree. The controversy issues from the definition of the term *battering*. The significance of battering as well as the philosophy underlying many batterer's programs is based on the politics of gender roles and history of intergender interactions in society. Many researchers and activists tend to define battering as a pattern of intimidation, coercive control, and oppression (Levinson, 1989; Pence & Paymar, 1993; Stark, 1996). Although batterers use physical assault to consolidate a pattern of domination, they may not always rely on actual beatings. Battering behavior is supported by historical and social entitlements afforded to the male gender role.

However, anti-domestic violence researchers and practitioners have yet to agree on a common definition of battering. Straus (1999) contended that the belief that battering is a pattern of behaviors that results in establishing power and control of one party over the other in an intimate relationship should be termed the *broad* definition. This interpretation, Straus asserted, is generally endorsed by service providers as well as activists in contrast to the narrow definition ("only physical assault"), which is espoused by "academics and researchers" (p. 38). He suggested that the moral agendas underlying these two perspectives are also different. The goal of the first one is to end "oppression of women, regardless of the type of oppression," whereas the second proposes to "end all physical assaults, regardless of the gender of perpetrator or victim" (p. 38).<sup>6</sup> However, Straus conceded that this distinction in definitions should be maintained due to the different legal and social policies as well as ethical requirements in society (Straus, 1999). Both definitions, according to him, have distinct social and political implications.

Much of our systematic responses to domestic violence will depend on whether we consider domestic violence to be limited to physical assault (narrow definition) or equate it with a pattern of intimidation, coercive control, and oppression, that is, battering (broad definition). If we subscribe to the narrow definition of domestic violence that confines our analyses to only physical hits, then all distinctions between men and women who use violence against their partners become irrelevant. This decontextualized view, however, would also lead to grossly erroneous understandings and treatment of women. Conversely, if we accept the broad definition of domestic violence, we have to acknowledge the

context of cultural norms and social power differentials between men and women. The prevalent social standards that provide disparate support for aggression, domination, and assaultive conduct to women and men can then be hardly overlooked. Traditionally, it is men and not women who were and still are allowed the power and entitlement to master and control their intimate partners in society. Emotional and physical battering systematically received and continue to receive approval if these reinforce masculine gender dominance. Most batterers' treatment programs are founded on confronting this historical privilege (Pence & Paymar, 1993). Therefore, labeling women as *batterers* and resocializing them to be nonviolent through education classes that are similar to men's programs seem illogical and inappropriate.

Nonetheless, two important questions have surfaced from the ongoing debate around women's use of violence against their heterosexual partners. First, are women who assault their heterosexual partners, particularly those who are battered themselves, different from men who routinely assault their partners? An affirmative answer to this query would require special intervention methods and advocacy that would accommodate the dynamics of women's violence in intimate heterosexual relationships. It would also ultimately demand a set of responses by the criminal justice system that is distinct from its responses to male batterers. Second, how is battered women's use of violence different from the violence used by male batterers? The second inquiry leads us to a deeper and more complete understanding of the dynamics of domestic violence.

#### PARAMETERS OF ANALYSIS

Often researchers as well as lay individuals claim that women's advocates minimize or deny the very existence of women's violence toward men in fear of social and political backlash. Shupe, Stacey, and Hazlewood (1987) stated, "There has been an almost conspiratorial silence about discussing women's violence toward men" (p. 46). (See also Macchietto, 1992.) The fear plaguing the women's advocacy community is that open recognition of women's violent behavior would "trivialize the problem of woman battering" (Shupe et al., 1987, p. 46). However, it is

undeniable that women are capable of violence (Bandura, 1973; Frodi, Macaulay, & Thome, 1977; White & Kowalski, 1994). Historically, women in many societies have taken part in violent political revolutions, terrorist activities, and aggressive nationalist movements. In the private arena of home, women have often abused their powers against children and the elderly (e.g., Margolin, 1992; Wauchope & Straus, 1990). In studies of same-sex relationships, there is ample evidence to indicate that women can be brutal toward their partners (e.g., Coleman, 1994; Renzetti, 1988, 1992). 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.

Before we review the available research studies in this area, it is important to understand the parameters of the issue at hand. The following review makes a distinction between violence in same-sex and heterosexual relationships. It recognizes that the contexts and dynamics of these two interactions are different enough to warrant separate discussions. Thus, it does not include the considerable body of findings on domestic violence in same-sex relationships. This discussion focuses only on studies that have investigated women's violence toward their heterosexual intimate partners. Furthermore, this summary does not include studies of lethal violence by women. It concentrates on violence by women in heterosexual relationships in which the partners have not been killed.

## REVIEW OF RESEARCH

If the state of investigation in the area of violence against women is preliminary, it is rudimentary in the domain of violence by women. Nonetheless, I have ventured to arrange the current body of research in this area into three groups based on similarities of theory and theme: (a) research promoting gender symmetry of intimate abuse; (b) research claiming women's violence toward male partners as self-defense and/or retaliatory action; and (c) research focusing on multiple corollaries of women's violence.

## RESEARCH ON GENDER SYMMETRY OF INTIMATE ABUSE

A crucial understanding of domestic violence is derived from studies that have used quantitative methodologies. A number of large-scale studies inquiring into men's and women's use of physical violence have indicated that women's use of physical aggression is comparable to that of men (e.g., Archer & Ray, 1989; Arias, Samios, & O'Leary, 1987; Bookwala, Frieze, Smith, & Ryan, 1992; Caulfield & Riggs, 1992; D. G. Dutton, 1994; Macchietto, 1992; Moffit & Caspi, 1999; Steinmetz, 1977-1978, 1980, 1981; Steinmetz & Lucca, 1988; Straus, 1993, 1997, 1999; Straus & Gelles, 1986; Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980; Sugarman & Hotaling, 1989). Straus (1993) and Cook (1997) provided excellent summaries of studies that indicate nearly equal levels of assaults by male and female intimate partners. These studies of dating as well as conjugal or cohabiting partners asserted that both women and men use physical assault at least as often to resolve conflicts. Some claim that women may even initiate physically aggressive interactions more often than do their male partners (e.g., Billingham & Sack, 1986; Bookwala et al., 1992; DeMaris, 1992; Gryl, Stith, & Bird, 1991; Sorenson & Telles, 1991; Stets & Straus, 1990a).

Supporters of this view challenge the feminist structural theory of violence against women and propose a gender-neutral analysis instead (e.g., see Cook, 1997; D. G. Dutton, 1994; Straus, 1993). The feminist-structural theory of domestic violence suggests that the underpinnings of woman abuse lie in the historical and current status and power differentials of the genders (Kurz, 1993). The dynamics of violence against women involve the goal of dominating women by using various tactics of coercive control in both public and private arenas so as to maintain the systems of patriarchy in society. The detractors of this theory claim that because both men and women use violence against their partners equally, this is the true nature of intimate relationships. Such violence, therefore, should be redefined as mutual abuse or family violence.

The majority of these studies has used the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS; Straus, 1979) and its revised version, CTS2 (Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996).<sup>7</sup> Although the CTS studies indicate similarities in the number of assaultive acts by men and women, they recognize there are substantial differences in injury levels. In situations of intergender violence, women receive

significantly more serious injuries than do men (e.g., Cascardi, Langhinrichsen, & Vivian, 1992; Moffit & Caspi, 1999; Morse, 1995; Saunders, 1986, 1988a; Schwartz, 1987; Stets & Straus, 1990b; Straus, 1991, 1997; Straus et al., 1980).

The CTS studies have been severely criticized by feminist-structural theorists. The main criticism of these studies centers on the argument that the scales do not allow any room for contexts and motives of intimate partner violence (for a comprehensive critique of the CTS, see DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 1998, and Kimmel, 2002 [this issue]). In particular, the CTS tends to ignore the influence of cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Although there is some recognition of emotional violence in the instrument, the focus is mainly on physical acts of violence. This linearity of the CTS results in counting "blows" and assessing "severity" of violence according to a rank-order set by the authors, which might not reveal the full context of violent behavior. For instance, consider a situation in which an immigrant woman has thrown a pot at her husband who has just destroyed her passport and conditional residency status card. On the CTS, the magnitude of the woman's violence would be considered much greater than her husband's. Also, on levels of severity, the tearing up of papers would compute much lower than the physical violence that has just occurred. Yet, the consequences of destroying the papers that lend this woman legitimate residency are devastating. She may lose her job, be deported, and lose custody of her children because of her abuser's behavior. Thus, the woman may view such an act as intensely abusive. Straus (1999) also acknowledged that verbal and/or emotional abuse is often considered by victims to be higher in violence than physical abuse and cited studies by Straus and Sweet (1992) and Vissing, Straus, Gelles, and Harrop (1993). (See also Follingstad, Rutledge, Berg, Hause, & Polek, 1990; O'Leary, 1999; Sackett & Saunders, 1999.)

The CTS has limited sensitivity in the situation previously described. Furthermore, the CTS would be incapable of registering violent behaviors that have different meanings in diverse cultures. For instance, in South Asian cultures, spitting at someone is considered to be extremely abusive and, in the Japanese culture, throwing liquid in someone's face has similar connotations. On the CTS, both behaviors would be assessed at a lower magnitude

of violence than would physical hits, yielding inaccurate and incomplete evaluation of the circumstances.

### **RESEARCH ON WOMEN'S VIOLENCE AS SELF-DEFENSE AND RETALIATORY ACTION**

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 (e.g., Barnett, Lee, & Thelen, 1997; Browne, 1987; Dasgupta, 1999; R. E. Dobash & Dobash, 1979, 1992; Feld & Straus, 1989; Hamberger, 1997; Hamberger, Lohr, & Bonge, 1994; Hamberger, Lohr, Bonge, & Tolin, 1997; Hamberger & Potente, 1994; Miller, 2001; Saunders, 1986, 1988b; Sommer, 1994; Straus, 1999; Vivian & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 1996). Although women's violent behavior toward their male partners may well be defensive, some investigators believe that such behavior actually adds to their vulnerability instead of increasing their safety (Bachman & Carmody, 1994; Bowker, 1983; Feld & Straus, 1989; Gelles & Straus, 1988; Straus, 1980).

Thus, women's violence in intimate relationships may be directly linked to their ongoing victimization through their male partners' coercion, intimidation, and violence. However, "self defense" as it is legally defined may not explain all instances of a woman's use of physical force, especially when there is no apparent "imminent" threat to her bodily integrity. A subjectively perceived threat to harm may also instigate and socially exculpate her aggression (U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, & National Institute of Mental Health, 1996).

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.

These studies, although they pay attention to the contexts and motivations of women's violent behavior, simplify the sources of the actions considerably. Most focus on single or very limited explanatory conditions, such as self-defense and/or retaliation. In light of the fact that women's gender roles and ensuing socialization patterns as well as sociopolitical institutions historically and universally forbid expressions of aggression against their husbands and male partners, their violence must emerge from more intricate grounds than limited motivating factors.

### RESEARCH ON MULTIPLE CAUSALITY OF WOMEN'S VIOLENCE

To compartmentalize women's motivations for engaging in violent behavior toward intimate partners as either self-defense (legally excusable and thus socially approved) or retaliation (which would identify a woman as the initiator of violence and therefore legally punishable) is to disregard the complexities of women's lives. A broad theoretical perspective that considers the interactions of social, historical, institutional, as well as individual variables in women's violence provides a better understanding of it. To that effect, the ecological nested model may fit the bill (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979, 1986). The model has already been adopted in the examination of domestic violence (B. Carlson, 1984; D. G. Dutton, 1994; M. A. Dutton, 1996; Edleson & Tolman, 1992; Heise, 1998; Lischick, 1999; Perilla, Bakeman, & Norris, 1994). The four interactive levels proposed by this model are as follows: (a) the individual level that considers a person's childhood socialization, past experiences, and personal perceptions of these; (b) the micro-system level that captures the immediate situation, such as family, workplace, and relationships; (c) the exo-system level that entails the structures and systems of the society in which one lives; and (d) the macro-system level that involves the larger background of group history, culture, and ethnicity.<sup>8</sup>

Studies that have comprehensively applied the ecological nested model to examine violence by women are rare. The few treatises that use this framework implicitly may be culled to extract a somewhat in-depth understanding of women's violence

(Dasgupta, 1999; Hamberger et al., 1994, 1997; Hooper, 1996; Miller, 1994; Renzetti, 1994). At the individual level, these studies recognize a large number of motivations for women's violence toward their male intimate partners (Dasgupta, 1999; Hamberger et al., 1994, 1997). For example, in addition to self-defense and retaliation, Hamberger and his colleagues (1994, 1997) as well as Dasgupta listed demanding attention, expressing anger, escaping abuse, and punishing the abuser as motives that compel women to engage in violent behavior. Dasgupta's study presented a greater variety of personal motives that range from reclaiming lost self-respect to saving loved family members and pets to establishing self-identity as a "tough" woman.

At the micro-system level, the history of women's experiences of abuse, which may stretch across several consecutive relationships, is an important consideration because it might influence their perceptions of danger (Dasgupta, 1999; U.S. Department of Justice et al., 1996). An overwhelming number of studies of women's violence point out that women who use violence are themselves victims of intimate abuse (Barnett et al., 1997; Browne, 1987; Dasgupta, 1999; R. E. Dobash & Dobash, 1979, 1992; Hamberger, 1997; Hamberger et al., 1994, 1997; Hamberger & Potente, 1994; Miller, 2001; Saunders, 1986, 1988b; Sommer, 1994; Straus, 1989, 1999; Vivian & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 1996). These studies find that self-defense is the most common reason for women's use of violence toward their intimate male partners. Literature also indicates a close connection between violence against women and abuse of their children by the same perpetrators (for a comprehensive explanation of the connections between abuse of women and child abuse, see Edleson, 1997). This may mean that many women's violent actions are triggered by the actual abuse or perceived threats to their children and loved ones (Dasgupta, 1999).

At the exosystem level, individuals come into contact with the systems and institutions of a society. In recent years, one of the most consequential institutions intervening in many battered women's lives has been the criminal justice system. The arrest policies (pro and mandatory) that have been established in many communities to protect battered women have also increased the number of arrests of women who have used violence toward their partners (e.g., Bourg & Stock, 1994; C. Carlson & Nidey, 1995;

D. A. Jones & Belknap, 1999; Lyon, 1999; Martin, 1997; Miller, 2001). In individual or dual-arrest situations, women have been taken into police custody as initiators of violence or mutual combatants. In most of the cases, women who were battered themselves were not identified as such and the contexts of their violence thereby remained invisible (Dasgupta, 1999; Hamberger, 1997; Saunders, 1995).

The incident focus of the criminal justice system and the domestic violence arrest policies have contributed significantly to this problem. A woman who picks up a knife or throws heavy objects at her partner when he is approaching her or holds a knife to his throat while he is asleep would be considered the initiator of violence if we view these acts stripped of their contexts. However, if we find out that in the first two situations, he was screaming obscenities at her and she recognized gestures that have preceded physical beatings in the past and that in the last incident, the woman had been severely battered for more than 15 years, it may change our (and perhaps the criminal justice system's) understandings of the cases.

In addition to the criminal justice system, there are many other systems such as the church, health care, education, immigration, transnational laws, and child protective services that may influence a woman's violent conduct. For example, the religious leader of a temple may exhort a woman to remain in an abusive marriage and the doctor who treats her broken bones and bruised face may ignore the obvious cause of such repeated injuries. Such interactions with important institutions may lead a woman to believe that there is no legitimate help or escape from her abusive relationship and, consequently, she may resort to violence to stop the abuse.

The implications of domestic violence arrests in either single or dual-arrest situations can be quite devastating to battered women. Women who have been arrested once may be reluctant in the future to call the police, even when they are being victimized (Hobart, 2000, Martin, 1997; Miller, 2001). Battered women may lose faith in the system if they feel that while the state did little to protect them when they were being victimized, it punished them when they stood up for themselves (Dasgupta, 1999; Miller, 2001). Women may lose jobs, custody of their children, be denied immigration, and miss out on equitable property settlements due to

their arrest or conviction records (for a description of the impact of arrest and conviction, see the National Clearinghouse for Defense of Battered Women, 2001). Such arrests may also implicitly establish a distinction in society between the "good" victim (passive, helpless, paralyzed with fear) who deserves social compassion and services and the "bad" victim (resistant, aggressive, with agency) who deserves penalization.

Cultures and patriarchal parameters that determine gender roles are examined at the macro-system level. Studies founded on feminist-structural theories have expressly scrutinized cultural prescriptions of masculinity-femininity and their bearing on domestic violence (e.g., Bograd, 1988; Breines & Gordon, 1983; DeKeseredy, 1988; R. E. Dobash & Dobash, 1979, 1992; R. E. Dobash, Dobash, Wilson, & Daly, 1992; Kurz, 1993; Pence & Paymar, 1993; Renzetti, 1994; Ritmeester & Pence, 1992; Stark, 1996; Stark & Flitcraft, 1996; Yllö, 1993). These studies propose that men's violence against their female partners is an offshoot of the masculine gender role, which is based on establishing mastery, supremacy, and authority. In fact, studies indicate that men who engage in repeated acts of violence against their female partners do so to assert power and control in their intimate relationships (e.g., Barnett et al., 1997; D. G. Dutton & Strachan, 1987; Edleson, Eisikovits, Guttman, & Sela-Amit, 1991; Follingstad et al., 1991; Hamberger et al., 1997). The cultural norms of women's violence are quite the opposite. Cultural prescriptions for gender roles generally prohibit women from engaging in aggressive actions targeting their male partners (e.g., Dasgupta, 1999; Dasgupta & Warriar, 1996; Miller, 1994; Perilla et al., 1994; Renzetti, 1994; Straus, 1999).

The ecological nested model provides us with a valid and complex understanding of violence by women as it takes into account the interactions of antecedents (e.g., historical context, social prescriptions of gender roles, social and legal reactions) as well as immediate conditions and consequences (e.g., early socialization, individual experiences, intentions, partner's responses, repercussions on the individual as well as work and family) of such actions. It helps ascertain the full contexts of women's experiences in their use of violence and is not too difficult to implement. A thorough and detailed case or life history would allow us to use

this framework to bring the contexts of a woman's violence into full view.

## DISCUSSION

The major problem plaguing the popular understanding of women's violence is the tendency to remove such behavior from its complete context. Even when the surrounding contexts are somewhat recognized, the dynamic underpinnings of the interactions are often overlooked. The criminal justice system plays an extremely important part in how we as a society interpret and define events and actions. Because the criminal justice system approaches incidents as isolated and separate from each other, we, as a society, end up also removing behaviors from their circumstances. Once actions and behaviors are dislodged from their contexts, the result is a fallacious understanding. In this particular instance, men's and women's assaultive behaviors are perceived as the same and both are termed *battering* due to the obliteration of contexts.

When exploring the critical question of whether battered women who assault their heterosexual partners are different from male batterers, and if so, how, one must conduct a full contextual analysis of the relationship. Such scrutiny would help us not only determine whether the relationship is fraught with domestic violence but also identify the batterer and victim. The research clearly indicates that women who assault their heterosexual partners are distinct from men who engage in battering behaviors, as most of the women are victims of ongoing abuse. Furthermore, the research suggests that men's and women's violence toward their heterosexual partners is historically, culturally, motivationally, and situationally dissimilar from each other. The consequences of these actions differ as well. For instance, because traditionally, our cultures delineate different norms for men's and women's roles, perceptions of their own abusive behaviors also fundamentally differ. Women tend to recognize such behavior as a violation of their socially prescribed gender role and readily confess to their transgressions (Dasgupta, 1999; R. P. Dobash, Dobash, Cavanagh, & Lewis, 1998; Vivian & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 1996). Men, on the other hand, tend to minimize their violence against female partners and/or blame the victims, which

reflect a greater sense of entitlement to such behavior than their opposite sex counterparts (Browne, 1987; Faith, 1993).

Both men and women use violence to realize their own particular goals. Although both genders use violence to achieve control, women try to secure short-term command over immediate situations, whereas men tend to establish widespread authority over a much longer period. Even when such results are not consciously intended, historical, political, and ideological components of society confer these consequences on men's and women's abusive behaviors. For instance, men's violence tends to strike prolonged fear in their partners, whereas such behavior by women tends not to produce similar results (Barnett et al., 1997; Dasgupta, 1999; Hamberger & Guse, 2002 [this issue]; Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Neidig, & Thorn, 1995; Miller, 2001; Morse, 1995; Russell, Lipov, Phillips, & White, 1989).

The majority of research findings report that women who use violence are battered themselves and use physical aggression to escape or stop this abuse (Barnett et al., 1997; Browne, 1987; Dasgupta, 1999; R. E. Dobash & Dobash, 1979, 1992; Hamberger, 1997; Hamberger et al., 1994, 1997; Hamberger & Potente, 1994; Miller, 2001; Saunders, 1986, 1988b; Sommer, 1994; Straus, 1989, 1999; Vivian & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 1996). However, studies also indicate that generally women are quite unsuccessful in achieving their objectives through violence. That is, in most cases, women are able to neither control violence against themselves nor modify their abusive partners' behaviors according to their own will by using violence against them (e.g., Barnett et al., 1997; Dasgupta, 1999). On the contrary, most women declare that assaultive behaviors make them even more vulnerable to their partners' violence (Bachman & Carmody, 1994; Bowker, 1983; Carmody & Williams, 1987; Dasgupta, 1999; Gelles & Straus, 1988; Morse, 1995; Straus, 1993, 1999). In the face of such failure to achieve their goals, women's continued use of violence against their partners has to be examined in a more complex way.

Systemic responses to women who use violence continue to be a challenge to advocates and researchers alike. The supposed "gender neutrality" of the criminal justice system (e.g., mandatory arrest policies) may, in fact, be responsible for the increase in women arrested for domestic violence. However, this claim of gender neutrality of the criminal justice system is expressly

inaccurate. Renzetti (1994) quite rightly pointed out that the legal framework to curb men's violence toward their female partners is being incorrectly used as a standard to assess female conduct. The situation may be explicated by an analogy. Confronted by accusations of racism and ethnocentrism, many domestic violence shelters in this country state that they are "colorblind." However, the codes of most shelters have been set by and for White women. Therefore, the statement, "We treat everyone the same," in actuality can only mean "we treat everyone as though she or he is White." Hooper (1996) wrote eloquently about the dangers of a supposed gender-neutral legal system as follows:

Promoting a single response to domestic violence, may prevent the criminal justice system from differentiating between violent women and violent men, thereby holding women who are charged with domestic violence to a standard of male violence. This male standard is based on a theory of domestic violence that assumes the offender has the social experiences of a man. Inherent in this standard is an assumption that the offender's actions have historically been, and continue to be, condoned by the community and the society. Women who are charged with domestic violence offenses cannot be treated under this same paradigm, because the societal and economic factors which influence their violence operate in ways that vary greatly from the ways they operate in men's lives. Traditionally, while male violence against women has been condoned, as acknowledged, for example, in the common law right to beat one's wife set forth in Blackstone's Commentaries, women's violence against men has been viewed as a rebellion against authority. (pp. 176-177)

Indeed, women's violence toward their intimate partners has historically been seen as a contradiction to their gender role (Gilbert, 2002 [this issue]). In fact, social as well as legal responses to their behaviors clearly indicate to women and men when and where they can use violence. For example, if a man repeatedly harasses and assaults a female stranger, the laws of the land and society would most likely treat him differently than if he does the same to his spouse. Again, if a woman uses violence against an abusive stranger, it would evoke different reactions than if the abuser were her intimate partner.

Not only is a woman not supposed to retaliate against her battering partner, she is not even allowed to fight back against his ongoing physical attacks. In conceptualizing a battered woman, the

legal system and society has construed her as a passive and helpless person who is too paralyzed by the abuse to take any actions on her own behalf. Yet, even the most subservient and fearful battered woman deploys shrewd survival strategies on a daily basis to keep her children and herself alive (Campbell, Rose, Kub, & Nedd, 1998; M. A. Dutton, 1992; Gondolf & Fischer, 1988). In her reservoir of survival maneuverings, violence may occupy a vital place. Fighting back may be a resistance tactic many battered women choose to use.

Contextualizing women's violence becomes even more important as we move toward configuring a multicultural society. Although gender roles in most cultures relegate women to a subservient position, there are great variations among cultures and ethnicities. Many nations do not suppress women's violence as much as Judeo-Christian cultures. For example, Islam and Hinduism do not consider aggression and femininity as antithetical (see D. E. Jones, 1997; Mernissi, 1975; Mookerjee, 1988; Wadley, 1988). In comparison to White women (Moss, Pitula, Campbell, & Halstead, 1997), Black women may also use violence more to resist their partners' abuse (West & Rose, 2000). Thus, women from these cultures may not be as inhibited about using violence against their heterosexual partners as are their Anglo counterparts. How the U.S. criminal justice system will view women from other cultures who use violence against their partners is anybody's guess. We need to recognize the racist, sexist, and xenophobic realities of the criminal justice system (Ruttenberg, 1994) if we want to reconstruct it to fit the diverse population of the future.

#### FUTURE RESEARCH

One of the most problematic issues currently facing the anti-domestic violence movement is the high number of battered women being arrested on domestic violence charges. Even more questionable is the labeling and disposition of battered women who use force against their abusers as *batterers*, making it appear they are similar to men who systematically abuse their intimate partners. Part of the problem arises because we continue to equate all intimate violence with battering. A distinction between violence used as a pattern of battering and that which is not needs to

be clarified in our activism and research work. Although anti-domestic violence advocates and practitioners have become extremely interested in women's violent behavior, research in this area is still at an early stage.

To rectify the lack of understanding of women's violence against their heterosexual partners, future inquiries must be founded on sound theoretical assumptions. Continued murkiness in theoretical grounding may lead to repercussions that have serious effects on women's lives. Failure to determine whether women's or men's violence is a pattern of coercive control, intimidation, and dominance may lead to incorrect dismissal of the gendered nature of domestic violence, spurious policy implications such as development of inappropriate treatment programs for women who use violence, unjust exclusion of women who have used violence from the service infrastructure constructed to assist "victims," as well as unqualified and retributive criminal justice system responses, especially toward women from different cultures and ethnicities.

Research on women's use of violence must be placed within appropriate contexts and understood in terms of cultural, historical, social, individual, and cross-cultural variables. The ecological nested framework may be a sound method in conducting such research in the future. This model would allow analyses of women's violence from a multilayered and interactive perspective. Investigations into the connections between victimization and victims' use of violence; the role of culture, ethnicity, class, and immigration status in women's use of violence; and the reactions of significant institutions in society to women who have used violence may lead us to deeper insights into domestic violence itself. It would also be important to examine intrapersonal factors such as addiction and substance abuse that might affect women's use of violence.

Exploring the responses of law enforcement, the judiciary, service and advocacy agencies, family, and community to women who have used violence in terms of race, class, culture, ethnicity, and immigration status would undoubtedly further our knowledge in this area. The inescapable issue that would require close review here is ethnogender sensitivity as well as appropriateness of mandatory arrest policies for communities of color. Since proarrest and mandatory arrest policies are the popular solutions

du jour for domestic violence, the challenge is to increase the ethnogender responsiveness of such policies. For example, although it might be difficult to differentiate between defensive and nondefensive violence (e.g., assaults that may be based on anticipated violence by the partner), distinguishing valid indicators that would identify a predominant aggressor (e.g., the person who might cause more injury and harm) in a domestic violence situation may resolve some problems surrounding mandatory arrest policies.<sup>9</sup>

In terms of prevention research, a critical question to probe is whether children who witness their mothers' violence are affected differently than are children who view only the victimization of their mothers. Such experiences may differentially interact with multiple variables, such as children's gender and age. However, the most important and pragmatic issue that begs attention is the development of a system of advocacy for battered women who use violence in intimate relationships. Because the philosophical basis and infrastructure of anti-domestic violence agencies rely on female victimization, battered women who use violence may be unfairly shut out from services due to their apparent abusiveness. Instead, we need to advance strong advocacy for battered women who have used violence against their batterers. It is only by founding our activism on a complex understanding of women's violence that we can build a comprehensive anti-domestic violence movement.

## NOTES

1. A significant share of scholarship on domestic violence places gender at the center of its analyses and asserts that asymmetrical gender relations, emanating from patriarchal social codes, are the major contributors to abuse of women (Bograd, 1988; R. E. Dobash & Dobash, 1979, 1992; Faith, 1993; Hearn, 1998; Pence & Paymar, 1993; Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980; Yllö, 1988, 1993).

2. Lincoln and Lancaster County reports that in 1998, 21% of domestic violence arrestees were women compared with 25% in 1996.

3. See Brookhoff's (1997) findings (as cited in Straus, 1999) on domestic violence-related police calls in Memphis, Tennessee. Brookhoff found that in 22% of all calls, the suspect was a woman.

4. Estimates of women arrested for domestic violence are as follows: Bozeman, Montana—less than 10%; Newport, St. Johnsbury, Burlington, Rutland, Bennington, Brattleboro, Barre, and White River Jct., Vermont—35%; Grand Forks, North Dakota—12%; and Orem, Utah—20% to 40% (participants at the seminar offered by Praxis International, Inc., 1999).

5. Interestingly, an alternate vocabulary has existed for some time now. The National Clearinghouse for the Defense of Battered Women (NCDBW) in Philadelphia, PA has been using the term "women charged with crime/s" and the Domestic Abuse Intervention Project (DAIP) in Duluth, MN has replaced the terminology, "women batterers" with "women who use violence." To distinguish between male batterers and women who use violence towards their male intimate partners, Hamberger & Potente (1994) also recommend a neutral label: "domestically violent" women.

6. From this perspective, there can be no justifiable violence in society, be it for self-defense or stopping assaults by an oppressor.

7. Yllö (1993) incisively argued that the philosophical underpinnings of the Conflict Tactics Scale are questionable. "Why begin with the assumption that violence is a conflict tactic? Instead of viewing violence as a conflict tactic, feminists suggest that it is better conceptualized as a tactic of coercive control to maintain the husband's power" (p. 53).

8. Edleson and Tolman (1992) proposed a fifth system, the mesosystem, which includes the individual's social environment and his or her history of interactions with these systems.

9. Predominant or primary aggressor arrest policies in domestic violence situations have already been implemented and evaluated in many regions of the country. See Hirschel and Buzawa (in press) for a complete list.

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