

The 1999 General Social

BY YASMIN JIWANI

Dans cet article l'auteure dit que l'Enquête sociale générale menée par Statistique Canada en 1999 sur la violence conjugale a contribué à élargir le fossé entre les réalités de cette violence si bien connues des femmes et des intervenantes de première ligne et les mythes populaires intégrés par la société sur l'agression faite aux femms et les tendances à la violence.

Against a backdrop of headline murders of women and children by their abusive partners, the unveiling of Statistics Canada's 1999 General Social Survey on Spousal Violence has contributed to the growing gap between the realities of wife abuse that women and frontline workers know first-hand, and the popular myths that permeate society about women's aggression and tendencies to violence. The General Social Survey (GSS) on Spousal Violence was released as part of Statistics Canada's annual publication on *Family Violence in Canada: A Statistical Profile, 2000*. Already, journalists and men's rights proponents are publicizing these results in support of their claims about women's violence. The danger lies in policy-makers taking the survey results at face-value and using them as a rationale for further reducing the already scarce resources allocated to rape crisis centres, shelters, and services for battered women.

In a country where 3.4 wives are murdered for every one husband killed (Locke), and where previous statistics reveal that 98 per cent of sexual assaults and 86 per cent of violent crimes are committed by men (Johnson); where

Women who are in violent relationships experience low self-esteem and being isolated from the support of others, the abuser becomes the referent.

women constitute 98 per cent of spousal violence victims of sexual assault, kidnapping, or hostage taking (Fitzgerald); and where 80 per cent of victims of criminal harassment are women while 90 per cent of the accused are men (Kong), the GSS findings are startling. The GSS findings reveal that the rates of spousal violence experienced by men and women were only slightly different—eight per cent for women, and seven per cent for men in relationships five years prior, and four per cent for both women and men in their current relationships. At a superficial level, the findings suggest that

women and men are equally violent, thus feeding the backlash against the experiences and observations of frontline workers, academics, and policy-makers who have long argued about the widespread prevalence of male violence.

Could it be that these findings reflect an accurate portrait of the declining levels of violence and/or that women have now achieved gender parity in violence when they have not been able to achieve this in other domains of social life? Or are we to completely negate everything we hear about the growing levels of violence—from road rage to stalking, date-rape, sexual harassment, workplace harassment and the murder of women in their homes and on the streets? Or are we to discount all the other statistics that Statistics Canada has published beginning with the decisive 1993 Violence Against Women Survey to the 1999 statistical profile on *Family Violence in Canada*? If violence is about power and dominance, have women become increasingly powerful and dominant?

The GSS survey results were derived from telephone interviews with a sample of 26,000 respondents aged 15 years and over located in ten provinces. The total number of respondents included 14,269 women and 11,607 men. Respondents were asked ten questions which were derived from the Violence Against Women Survey (VAWS), and subsequently modified. The questions focused on violence, ranging from threats to sexual assault, that had occurred in the 12-month or five-year period prior to the interview. The definition of violence used in the GSS was derived from acts of violence as defined and described in the *Criminal Code*.

The following sections outline some of the problematic aspects of the GSS and how they could be used to minimize the reality of the overwhelming prevalence of male violence against women. The GSS findings should be used cautiously as they do not capture the full extent of violence against women. In fact, in comparing the 1993 GSS results with the findings of the 1993 VAWS, the GSS results captured approximately half the actual percentage of cases of wife assaults that were reported by women who participated in the Violence Against Women Survey (Johnson 54). Further, unlike the VAWS, the GSS does not take into consideration sexual harassment and emotional abuse in its reported rates of violence. Nor does it track the increase in violence directed against pregnant women, or women who are vulnerable because of their social class, disability,

Survey on Spousal Violence

An Analysis



Lillian Broca, "Hush, Hush, My Babies. What is that Sound?" Graphites, pastel, spackle on rag paper, 30" x 42", 2000.
Photo: Weekes.

race, or sexual orientation. The GSS, unlike the VAWS, only focuses on experiences of violence within a confined time period (12 months and five years), and in the context of a spousal relationship, whereas previous surveys have focused on women's experiences of violence from age 16 and up, and have considered numerous forms of violence.

Finally, the GSS relies on self-reports by respondents. This in itself can limit how much women, who are in current or previous abusive relationships, may wish to reveal. There is still an aura of shame surrounding violence in intimate relationships, and for many women, self-disclosure may be influenced by feelings of guilt, embarrassment, sense of personal failure, and fear of trusting an interviewer, particularly one representing what is a government agency (i.e., Statistics Canada). Further, it can take a long time before a woman is able to disclose the violence she has experienced.

Violence is about power and control. Women who are in violent relationships tend to experience low self-esteem (as revealed by the GSS), and in the context of being isolated

from support from others, the abuser and his perceptions become the referent. The low self-esteem itself is perpetuated by the abuser and enhanced by the social messages that women receive about their status as women and their powerlessness as victims of abuse. These women may respond to an interviewer in a manner that not only minimizes their abuse but also mistakenly communicates that they did something to merit the abuse. Women tend to take on the responsibility for the relationship, and are often blamed for the failure of a relationship. Frontline workers are well aware of these dynamics but survey research tends not to capture these dynamics.

The GSS and who it excludes

The GSS, unlike the Uniform Crime Reporting Survey, which is based on police reported incidents, collects data based on individual experiences of victimization. In the GSS survey released on July 25, 2000, respondents in same-sex relationships constituted only one per cent of the total



Lillian Broca, "Eve Trapped in the Edge of Dreams," Graphites, acrylics, spackle on panel, 32" x 48", 2000.
Photo: Weekes.

sample surveyed. The GSS only includes English and French speaking individuals living in households that have a telephone. In terms of the exclusion of non-English or non-French speakers, the GSS findings are limited particularly in light of the number of women who may be caught in abusive relationships, and who for reasons of safety, immigration criteria, and dependency on their sponsoring spouse, are not able to speak the official language and reveal their experiences of violence.

In addition, the survey's criteria for respondents—that they live in households equipped with telephones—effectively excludes homeless women, women in transition, women who are escaping abuse, and women who by virtue of their social class, poverty, and homelessness are more vulnerable to violence. In fact, many homeless women may have become homeless as a result of the violence they experienced in their relationship. Aboriginal women living on reserves and homes without access to household telephones are also excluded. Telephones are also not the preferred medium of communication for those with hearing or speech disabilities. Hence, these potential respondents are also excluded despite research, which suggests that women with disabilities are more vulnerable to violence (Rocher Institute).

Questions Asked

The GSS asked respondents the following questions

about violence, which were defined according to the Criminal Code as constituting offences that could be reported to the police or elicit police intervention. The overall rates of spousal abuse reported in the GSS do not include emotional abuse although these are presented within the context of Statistics Canada's profile on Family Violence in Canada.

The module of questions and the preamble that preceded them used in the GSS is presented below:

It is important to hear from people themselves if we are to understand the serious problem of violence in the home. I'm going to ask ten short questions and I'd like you to tell me whether, in the past 5 years, your spouse/partner has done any of the following to you. Your responses are important whether or not you have had any of these experiences. Remember that all information provided is strictly confidential.

During the past five years, has your partner:

1. Threatened to hit you with his/her fist or anything else that could have hurt you?
2. Thrown anything at you that could have hurt you?
3. Pushed, grabbed or shoved you in a way that could have hurt you?
4. Slapped you?
5. Kicked, bit, or hit you with his/her fist?
6. Hit you with something that could have hurt you?
7. Beaten you?

- 8. Choked you?
- 9. Used or threatened to use a gun or knife on you?
- 10. Forced you into any unwanted sexual activity by threatening you, holding you down, or hurting you in some way? (Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics 13)

On the surface, these questions appear to be commonsensical and direct in their focus. However, the crucial element that is missing is the context of the violent incident. There is no indication whether a respondent slapped, kicked, or bit her/his partner in retaliation or self-defence. It is known that women who have been abused are often forced to retaliate against the abuser in self-defence. The number of high profile cases of women who endured abuse and battering, and who have acted in self-defence is a well-known issue which Statistics Canada could have considered when composing the module of questions asked of respondents. There are no questions about the intent of the abuser, e.g., “Why did he hit or threaten you?” Similarly, there are no other forms of violence included, e.g., “Did he ever sit on you?” Although the questions asked make reference to the use of a gun or knife, there are many other weapons of violence such as a baseball bat that are used against women.

The GSS questions equalize all forms of violence. Not only are extreme forms ranked with less extreme acts of violence, but when decontextualized (i.e., without asking for a context or tapping into the power dynamics inherent in the situation), the questions imply that one form of violence is like another, and that the intent of an action equals the outcome. So a statement like (2) “thrown anything at you that could have hurt you” may elicit an answer that does not take the outcome of an action into consideration, i.e., “it could have hurt me” as opposed to the reality, which is that there was no injury involved, or none that merited medical attention. Within a framework which denies that women’s response to violence with violence is often predicated on self-defence, the above response would be meaningless at the least, and dangerous if taken at face-value. Throwing something at an abuser in order to impede his violent actions allows the abuser, if he is the respondent to these questions, to shift the responsibility of his actions and to claim that he could have been hurt.

In analyzing the set of questions that respondents were asked, it is clear that there are several problematic assumptions at work. The first is the assumption that a woman would have had only one intimate relationship—there are no questions pertaining to the possibility that multiple abusers might have been involved. The question could have been phrased as “Has any person with whom you have had an intimate relationship, done the following to you?” Such a question might then have included dating violence.

Although the GSS includes a component on emotional

abuse, the specific questions it asks could well have fitted within the above module of questions. Thus, one of the common ways by which abusers harass their victims is by threatening to hurt their loved ones (e.g., children, other family members, and/or pets). This is a measure of violence and should have been included here particularly because the final figures for spousal violence do not take into consideration the figures derived from the module assessing the impact of emotional abuse. These two modules and results are separated. Similarly, although isolation as a variable is measured by the emotional abuse module, it should have been asked in the spousal abuse module outlined above based on the reality that abusers will begin by isolating their victims from family, friends, and acquaintances, and through isolation, make their victims more vulnerable to violence. Research demonstrates that the impact of emotional abuse is far greater than that resulting from physical violence. Since violence in intimate relationships is about power and control, the most powerful way in which power and control are imposed is through emotional abuse and fear. Separating the physical violence from emotional abuse fails to take into consideration the ways in which violence is used in intimate relationships.

The findings

Even though the GSS results reveal a similar rate of spousal abuse among women and men, a closer reading divulges interesting and symbolic differences. For instance, women not only experience more severe forms of abuse, but the impact of the abuse is far greater on them as compared to men who report experiences of violence.

What is most clear from the data presented is that the severity of woman abuse outweighs the kinds of violence experienced by male spouses. If we focus on the responses to questions 7-10, the differences in results are dramatic. More than twice as many women as men reported being beaten, five times as many women as men reported being choked, almost twice as many women as men reported having a gun or knife used against them, and finally, more than six times as many women as men reported being sexually assaulted.

These findings are similar for women and men in their current relationships.

That women may end up using less severe forms of violence in retaliation or self-defence is evident in the kinds of violence reported by men. These included being slapped, having something thrown at them, or being kicked, bitten or hit by their spouses. Women tend to be

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smaller in size than men, have less physical strength, and tend to use violence for purposes of self-defence (Duffy and Momirov, 1997:36). This is not to imply that there are no violent women but that violence directed by women against men is very different in social meaning and outcome than the violence directed by men against women. This is especially significant when we take into consideration the unequal status of women and the historic entrenchment of gender-based discrimination.

Drawing from the work of Lenore Walker, Johnson notes that:

the meaning of a violent act also differs significantly for male and female victims. Men begin as the dominant partners in marriage, and one episode of violence, or even the threat of violence, has the potential to change the dynamics of the relationship, reinforcing his dominance and her passivity. A woman's violence against her husband seldom has such an effect. (58)

The GSS also reveals that women are victimized more frequently than men, and end up being physically injured as a result of the violence. The results underline the severity of violence experienced by women. Some 65 per cent of the women were assaulted more than once, and 26 per cent reported being assaulted more than ten times. Forty per cent of women compared to 13 per cent of men reported being physically injured as a result of the violence in the five years preceding the interview and women were five times more likely to require medical attention as a result of the violence (Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics 14). Four out of ten women are afraid for their lives, as compared to one out of ten men. Age is also a relevant factor indicating a heightened vulnerability to violence for women under 25 years, as compared to women who are 45 years and older.

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Emotional Abuse

While the findings of the differential rates of emotional abuse experienced by both women and men were not included in the rates of spousal violence, the GSS measures of emotional abuse are again indicative of how women are more severely impacted by violence and rendered more vulnerable to violence as a result of the psychological abuse they experience.

Interestingly, the GSS results indicate that men and women are equally jealous and possessive. What this finding does not capture is how jealousy and posses-

siveness are part of the dynamics of abuse. More specifically, qualitative studies indicate that jealousy and possessiveness are often invoked in a violent relationship and stem from the isolation, control and coercion exercised by the dominant partner. In this regard, it is worth viewing the jealousy and possessiveness percentages in the context of the other kinds of emotional abuse that are measured by the GSS.

For instance, women reported a larger incidence of being isolated (in response to the question: "He/She tried to limit contact with family and friends"). Similarly women also reported a significantly higher rate of being called names and being put down. Four times as many women as men reported being threatened, harmed, or having someone close to them being threatened or harmed; more than twice as many women reported having their property damaged or their possessions destroyed as compared to men; and, four times as many women as men reported being denied access to family income.

All of these measures indicate a level of emotional abuse that far outweighs that experienced by men. They also indicate the deliberateness with which women are rendered dependent on men. This is especially the case with access to family income and hence financial independence.

Many studies indicate that women who are in violent relationships often do not leave these relationships because of their fear for their children, isolation from networks of support, financial dependence on the spouse, and low self-esteem (Duffy and Momirov; Jiwani and Buhagiar; DeKeseredy and MacLeod). The GSS results illustrate the extent to which these dynamics of abuse are still prevalent. What they do not capture is the range of violence that women experience—from the initial period in a relationship, to the violence they experience during pregnancy (21 per cent of women reported this in a previous survey, see, for example, Fitzgerald), to the escalation of violence upon leaving a relationship—an escalation that can assume stalking and other forms of criminal harassment. The GSS only captures the more overt forms of this. More than this, the GSS fails to underscore the reality and extent of male violence against women.

Consequence of violence

The severity and multiple consequences of violence for women are clearly identified in the GSS results. Women, more than men, report being more fearful, experience problems sleeping, suffer from depression, anxiety attacks and low self-esteem.

Discussion

The high rates of violence reported by men in the GSS results may be indicative of the popularization of the issue of violence and its decontextualization as a phenomenon divorced from power and power imbalances. The similar

levels of violence reported by both women and men would seem to suggest that men and women are equally violent. Without including questions about the contextual elements that may have precipitated the violence or how violence was used as an instrument of power and control, the GSS results do not tell us anything new. In fact, the overall GSS results match those obtained in other surveys using the Conflict Tactic Scale. The latter instrument has been criticized by social scientists for not taking into consideration the unequal power relations between men and women (DeKeseredy and MacLeod; Johnson); an inequality that may be even more pronounced and potent within the context of intimate relations. As DeKeseredy and MacLeod observe with regard to the Conflict Tactic Scale (CTS):

The CTS simply counts the number of violent acts committed by people and thus cannot tell us why people use violence. Even though CTS data almost always show that men and women are equally violent, the fact is they use violence for different reasons, with women using violence primarily to defend themselves and men using violence mainly to control their female partners. ... The CTS overlooks the broader social forces (e.g. patriarchy) that motivate men to victimize their female partners. (1997:63)

While the GSS is different from the Conflict Tactic Scale, it shares the same refusal to acknowledge the contextual factors that underpin and increase women's vulnerability to gender-based violence, and how that violence is used to maintain inequality. According to the commentary concluding the GSS results, Holly Johnson posits that the statistics indicate a significant decline in wife assault and a decline in the severity of violence directed against women. She does note however, that women are slightly more fearful now than before. Fear of violence or the threat of violence results from the use of violence as a tool of power and control which is used to maintain women's unequal status.

In contrast to the 1993 Violence Against Women Survey, the GSS does not examine the full spectrum of violence against women including such factors as sexual harassment. In fact, while the GSS attempts to capture the rates of emotional abuse, it does not take into consideration all the different forms of violence (from harassment, sexualization, objectification, and institutional forms of violence) that serve to "keep women in their place."

If the reported rates of violence against women are on the decline, it may be, as Holly Johnson suggests, a result of the successful struggles of frontline workers, advocates and policy-makers. On the other hand, the reported decline may be due to the normalization of violence, which the GSS tries to address through the specific formulation of its questions but may only be capturing in a limited way (as for example in the "equal" rates of violence

reported for men and women). Alternatively, the decline may be due to what Johnson refers to as the different reference periods in which the 1993 VAW survey and the current GSS were conducted. Qualitative studies of women's experiences of violence based on frontline workers' perceptions (e.g. Chambers; Jiwani and Buhagiar) suggest that although official rates of violence reflect a decline, the numbers of women who are victimized by violence have not decreased significantly. Rather, women have learned not to rely on institutions to protect them and to use other ways and means of protecting themselves from violence.

The GSS on violence only captures a small section of the continuum of violence experienced by women every day. It does not take into consideration the socio-economic and political context in which women live—a context symbolized by the pervasive objectification, sexualization, and devaluation of women as it occurs in the media, within the labour force, and in the increasing numbers of women who are made poor. Neither does it capture the full range of violence meted out to those women who cross normative boundaries, or who are at the intersections of various kinds of oppressions. The GSS cannot erase the reality of male violence against women.

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LEILA YOUNG

Mains apeurées
visages assoiffés

À Toi qui cadre les vents
caressant toute unité

Donner son existence
comme un jeton à la vérité

Apaiser les cris de l'enfant
qui alarment l'univers

Voir le mal rompre avec la parole
et l'action abriter la question

Petit tout petit tu es
L'infini dans l'immuable

Un microscope et une caméra
au torse du mouvement

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BERNADETTE RAFFOUL

Life Left Behind

*Lord I will go with you
walking by your side
learning eagerly
Only let me hear you say those words again:
"Come and follow me"*
—excerpt from the *Catholic Book of Worship*

Like a fool I followed you
into that room our first night
and fell on a table
cold hard and bare
lips quaking in time with Shakespearean rain
murmured fallacies against my ear
and the spontaneous drop of one black shoe
I made you hear

Good shepherd think of me
I thought
love me
move inside of me
save me
because I'm oh so cold
with this skin as drifted snow
that I toil to warm
positioned in birth before your form

In a dream I always made sure to moan

I made belief that only I held the sword
to draw water and blood from your side
to dice that purple cloak
to shreds I made believe you so good
I forgot the royal lie
I made you believe so hard
I rose you on high
do not think of yourself just any Jesus Christ

I defaced the dream in links
your arm in mine
two thorns strained
on a single forehead entwined
and soon
no blood running

It does not serve me well
to remember
the fishing net
still drying on the shore
in Galilee
beside ten thousand wooden boats
where I girded my loins at twenty-four
to become a fisher of you
man