



Towards an Understanding of Women's Use of Non-Lethal Violence in Intimate Heterosexual Relationships

Shamita Das Dasgupta

Recently, the anti-violence against women 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 of both men and women as well as an increase in only women being arrested and charged with domestic violence. For instance, family violence data in Connecticut indicate a steady rise in arrests of women between 1987 and 1997. The arrest data show that in 1997, women comprised 18% of the total arrests for domestic violence in contrast to 11% in 1987 (State of Connecticut, 1998). This increasing trend is also reflected in arrests of women. For example, reports from Boulder County, Colorado, reveal that in 1997, about 12% of domestic violence offenders were females, compared to 14.2% in 1998, and nearly 25% in the first six months of 1999 (Boulder County Domestic Abuse Prevention Project, 1999). On the other hand these changes are inconsistent with statistics from Lincoln/Lancaster County in Nebraska disclosing a 4% decline between 1996 and 1998 in dual as well as female only arrests (Family Violence Council, 1998). Practitioners from rural counties around the U.S. attending a seminar on *Women Who Use Violence* (Praxis International, Inc., December 7-8, 1999) claimed that over one year, the range of women arrested and charged with domestic violence in their communities varied between 10% to 40% of total arrests in these categories. Although reliable nationwide statistics on arrest rates are still unavailable and empirical data on the types of violence perpetrated by battered women are not clearly delineated, perceptions of advocates and practitioners around the country are that the problem of women being arrested on

domestic violence charges is significant.

Such arrest reports have raised concern among advocates about the appropriateness of law-enforcement and judicial responses to women who have used violence against their heterosexual partners. Detractors of the anti-violence against women movement have hailed these arrests as proofs of gender neutrality of family violence (see Family Violence Prevention Fund, 2000). They maintain that feminists alleging gender specificity of family violence have promoted anti-male attitudes in society, which have resulted in wide injustices towards men. Newspaper reports (Young, 1995; Burroughs, 1999), books (Cook, 1997; Pearson, 1997; Sikes, 1997) as well as television news and talk shows (e.g., "Battered by their Wives," 20/20 ABC News 9/19/1997; Oprah 3/1/999) have capitalized on this issue.

Confronted by this unprecedented situation, the judiciary and battered women's advocates have been frantically seeking responses that would be appropriate to women charged with domestic violence. Often, based on the purported gender-blindness of the justice system, the judiciary has viewed the established "batterers' treatment programs" as legitimate methods of dealing with women arrested for using violence against their male partners. Even the emerging rhetoric has marked females thus arrested as "batterers."

This VAWnet document is devoted to understanding how women's use of violence in intimate heterosexual relationships is defined, what the research tells us about women's violence, and why we need to reshape current societal responses to changing notions of violence in intimate relationships.

Clarifying Definitions

Although some battered women's advocates believe that sending women to batterers' programs is a valid disposition of women who have 'abused' their partners, many others disagree. A large part of the controversy issues from the definition of the term "battering." The connotation of "battering" as well as the philosophy underlying many "batterer's programs" is based on the politics of gender roles and history of inter-gender interactions in society.

Researchers and practitioners have yet to agree on a common definition of battering. Some researchers and activists tend to define battering as a pattern of intimidation, coercive control, and oppression (Levinson, 1989; Pence & Paymar, 1993; Stark, 1996). They contend that batterers frequently utilize physical assault to consolidate a pattern of domination, they may not always rely upon actual beatings. Straus (1999) contends, however, that defining battering as a pattern of behaviors, which results in establishing power and control of one party over the other in an intimate relationship, should be termed the "broad" definition. This interpretation of battering is generally endorsed by service providers as well as activists contrary to a more "narrow" definition ("physical assault only"), which is often espoused by academics and researchers. Straus suggests that the moral agenda underlying these two perspectives are different, with the goal of the broad one being ending "oppression of women, regardless of the type of oppression," whereas the narrow one proposes to "end all physical assaults, regardless of the gender of perpetrator or victim" (p. 38). Furthermore, Straus asserts that this distinction in definitions ought to be maintained (Straus, 1999). Both definitions have distinct social and political implications.

Many of our systematic responses to domestic violence will depend on how we define "battering." The decontextualized view ensuing from the "narrow" definition would lead to a grossly erroneous understanding and treatment of women. Conversely, when we accept the "broad" definition, we have to acknowledge the context of cultural norms that define male and female gender roles differently. We cannot be oblivious to the prevalent social standards that pro-

vide disparate support for aggression, domination, and assaultive conduct to women and men. Traditionally, it is men and not women, who were and are allowed the power and entitlement to master and control their intimate partners. Emotional and physical battering systematically received and continues to receive approval if utilized to reinforce masculine gender dominance. Most batterers' treatment programs are founded on confronting this historical privilege. Thus, the labeling of women as "batterers" and re-socializing 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: (1) Are women who assault their heterosexual partners different from male batterers? An affirmative answer to this query would require special intervention methods and advocacy that would accommodate the dynamics of women's aggression in intimate heterosexual relationships. It also would ultimately demand a set of responses by the criminal justice system that is distinct from its responses towards male batterers; and (2) How are these women different from male batterers? The second inquiry leads us to a deeper and more complete understanding of the dynamics of domestic violence.

Delineating Parameters

Many believe that "[t]here has been an almost conspiratorial silence about discussing women's violence toward men" (Shupe, Stacey, & Hazlewood, 1987, p. 46; see also, Macchietto, 1992). Often researchers as well as lay individuals claim that women's advocates minimize or deny the very existence of women's violence towards men dreading societal backlash. The fear is that open recognition of women's violent behavior would "trivialize the problem of woman battering" (Shupe et al., 1987, p. 46). 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. Women have often abused their powers against children and the elderly (e.g., Wauchope & Straus, 1990; Margolin, 1992). In studies of same-sex relationships, there is ample evidence to indicate that women can be brutal towards their partners (e.g., Renzetti, 1992; Coleman, 1994). Thus, the question is not whether women have the potential to be abusive, but whether their violence towards heterosexual partners is comparable to men's in terms of context, motivation, results, and consequences.

Before we review the available research 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 towards 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 where 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, we can attempt to categorize the body of research that is currently available in this area. I have ventured to arrange these into three groups based on similarities of theory and theme: (a) Research promoting gender neutrality of intimate abuse; (b) Research claiming women's violence towards male partners as self-defense and/or retaliatory action; and (c) Research focusing on multiple corollaries of women's violence.

Research on Gender Neutrality 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 men's (e.g., Steinmetz, 1977-78; 1981; Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980; Straus & Gelles, 1986; Arias, Samios, & O'Leary, 1987; Steinmetz & Lucca, 1988; Sugarman & Hotaling, 1989; Caulfield & Riggs, 1992; Macchietto, 1992; Straus, 1993; 1999; D. G. Dutton, 1994; Moffit & Caspi, 1999). These studies of dating as well as conjugal or cohabiting partners assert that both women and men resort to physical violence at least at equal rates to resolve conflicts. In fact, women may initiate physically aggressive interactions more often than do their partners (e.g., Stets & Straus, 1990a; Gryl, Stith & Bird, 1991; DeMaris, 1992).

Supporters of this view challenge feminist approaches to violence against women and propose a gender-neutral analysis instead (see Straus, 1993; D. G. Dutton, 1994). They claim that since both men and women use violence against their partners equally, this is the true nature of intimate relationships. Thus, such violence should be redefined as mutual abuse or family violence.

The majority of these large-scale studies have utilized the Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS) (Straus, 1979) and its revised version, CTS2 (Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996). Although studies using the CTS indicate similarities in the number of assaultive acts by men and women, they recognize that there are substantial differences in injury levels. Women receive significantly more serious injuries than do men (e.g., Straus et al., 1980; Saunders, 1986; Schwartz, 1987; Stets & Straus, 1990b; Straus, 1997; Cascardi, Langhinrichsen, & Vivian, 1992; Morse, 1995; Moffit et al., 1999).

The main critique of studies using the CTS centers on the argument that the scales do not allow any room for contexts and motives of intimate partner violence. 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 aggression. This linearity of CTS results in a counting of "blows" and assessing the "severity" of violence according to a set rank order. For instance, consider a situation where 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 that of her husband. On levels of severity also, the tearing up of papers would compute much lower than the physical violence that has just occurred. Yet, the consequences of the trashing of papers that lend this woman legitimate residency are extremely 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 violent.

Studies primarily relying on the CTS have been severely criticized by feminist-structural theorists. The feminist-structural theories of domestic violence suggest that the underpinnings of woman-abuse lie in the historical and current status and power differentials between the two genders. The dynamics of domestic violence involve the goal of dominating women by utilizing 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 thinking claim that since both men and women abuse their partners equally, such violence should be redefined as mutual abuse or family violence.

Straus (1999) also acknowledges that verbal or emotional abuse is often considered by victims to be more severe than physical abuse and refers to studies by Straus & Sweet (1992) and Vissing, Straus, Gelles, & Harrop (1993). The CTS has limited sensitivity in emotionally abusive situations. 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 physical hits. A comprehensive critique of the CTS is available online in a document by DeKeseredy and Schwartz (1998).

Research on Women's Violence as Self-Defense and Retaliatory Action

Various researchers studying women's violent behavior towards intimate partners have asserted that the main motivation of such violence 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 and/or to escape such attacks (e.g., Dobash & Dobash, 1979, 1992; Saunders, 1986, 1988; Hamberger & Potente, 1994; Vivian & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 1994; Barnett, Lee, & Thelen, 1997; Hamberger, 1997; Hamberger, Lohr, Bonge, & Tolin, 1997; Straus, 1999; Dasgupta, 1999). Although some investigators in the field believe that women's violent behavior towards their male partners actually adds to their vulnerability, they do concede that such behaviors may well be defensive (Bowker, 1983; Gelles & Straus, 1988; Bachman & Carmody, 1994).

Thus, a woman's violence in an intimate relationship may be directly linked to her ongoing victimization through her male partner's 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. Nonetheless, a subjectively perceived threat to harm may also instigate and exculpate her aggression (Hyman, 1996).

A number of other studies point to a variety of reasons for 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 stress (Follingstad, Wright, & Sebastian, 1991; Bachman & Carmody, 1994; Fiebert & Gonzalez, 1997; Hamberger et al., 1997; Straus, 1999; Dasgupta, 1999). These studies, although they pay some attention to the contexts and motivations of women's violent behavior, tend to considerably simplify the sources of the actions. Most focus on single or very limited explanatory conditions. In light of the fact that female gender roles and socialization patterns as well as socio-political institutions historically forbid expressions of aggression against their male partners, women's violence must be viewed as emerging from more intricate motivations.

Research on Multiple Causality of Women's Violence

To compartmentalize women's motivations for

engaging in violent behavior towards intimate partners as either self-defense (socially approved and therefore, legally excusable) or retaliation and other intentions (which would identify a woman as the initiator of abuse 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 would provide a better understanding of it. To that effect, an ecologically nested framework may fit the bill (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979). The framework has already been adopted in the examination of domestic violence (Carlson, 1984; Edleson & Tolman, 1992; D. G. Dutton, 1994; M. A. Dutton, 1996; Heise, 1998; Lischick, 1999). Five of the interactive levels proposed by this framework are: (1) Individual level that considers a person's childhood socialization, past experiences, and personal perceptions of these; (2) Microsystem level that captures the immediate situation such as family, workplace, relationships, etc.; (3) Mesosystem level that involves interactions between an individual's microsystems; (4) Exosystem level that entails the structures and systems of the society one lives in; and (5) Macrosystem level that involves the larger background of group history, culture, and ethnicity.

Studies that implicitly utilize the ecologically nested framework have been culled here to extract an in-depth understanding of women's violence (Hamberger et al., 1994; Renzetti, 1994; Miller, 1994; Hooper, 1996; Hamberger et al., 1997; Dasgupta, 1999). At the individual level, these studies recognize a large number of motivations for women's violence towards their male intimate partners (Hamberger et al., 1994; Hamberger et al., 1997; Dasgupta, 1999). For example in addition to self-defense and retaliation, Hamberger and his colleagues (1994, 1997) as well as Dasgupta (1999) list demanding attention, expressing anger, escape, and punishment as motives that compel women to engage in violent behavior. Dasgupta's study (1999) presents a greater variety of personal motives that ranges from reclaiming lost self-respect to saving loved family members and pets to establishing self-identity as a "tough" woman.

At the microsystem level, the history of a woman's experiences of abuse, which may stretch across sev-

eral consecutive relationships, is an important consideration since it might influence her perceptions of danger (Hyman, 1996; Dasgupta, 1999). An overwhelming number of studies of women's violence point out that women who use violence are themselves victims of intimate abuse (Dobash & Dobash, 1979, 1992; Saunders, 1986, 1988; Hamberger & Potente, 1994; Vivian & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 1994; Barnett et al., 1997; Hamberger, 1997; Hamberger et al., 1997; Straus, 1999; Dasgupta, 1999). These studies find that self-defense is the most common reason for women's use of violence towards their intimate male partners. Furthermore, literature indicates a close connection between domestic violence and child maltreatment (see Edleson, 1998). A number of women's violent actions may be triggered by the actual abuse or perceived threats to their children and loved ones (Dasgupta, 1999).

At the mesosystem level, an individual's microsystems interact with each other and indirectly change the person's environment. For example, an employer may be concerned with a family's situation and discuss this with the local clergy. These indirect communications may then result in direct intervention by the church or employer microsystem in the woman's life. The way in which these systems intervene will largely depend on how, for example, church doctrine, individual clergy or employers understand the complexity of the woman's situation (see Edleson & Tolman, 1992).

At the exosystem level, an individual comes into contact with the systems and institutions of a society. In recent years, the most consequential institution intervening in battered women's lives has been the criminal justice system. The arrest policies (pro and mandatory) that have been established to protect battered women have also increased the number of arrests of women who have used violence against their partners (e.g., Bourg & Stock, 1994; Carlson & Nidey, 1995; Martin, 1997; Jones & Belknap, 1999; Lyon, 1999). In individual or dual arrest situations, women have been taken into police custody as initiators or mutual combatants. In most of the cases, women who were battered themselves were not identified as such and thereby, the contexts of their violence remained invisible (Saunders, 1995; Hamberger, 1997; Dasgupta,

1999).

The “incidence focus” of the criminal justice system and domestic violence arrest policies has 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 when 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 preceded physical abuse, while in the last one the woman has been severely battered for over 15 years, it may change our understandings of the cases. In addition to the criminal justice system, there are many other systems such as the church, health care, education, immigration, and transnational laws, which may influence a woman’s violent conduct.

The implications of domestic violence arrests, single or mutual can be quite devastating for women. Women who have been arrested once may be reluctant in the future to call the police even when they are being victimized. 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 arrested them when they stood up for themselves (Dasgupta, 1999). Women may lose custody of their children, be denied immigration, and lose out on a property settlement due to their arrest records. Such arrests may also implicitly impose a distinction between the “good” victim (passive, helpless, paralyzed with fear) who deserves our compassion and services and the “bad” victim (resistant, aggressive, with agency) who deserves punishment.

Cultures as well as patriarchal parameters that determine gender roles are examined at the macrosystem level. Studies founded on feminist-structural theories have expressly scrutinized cultural prescriptions of male-female gender roles and their bearing on domestic violence (e.g., Dobash & Dobash, 1979, 1992; Breines & Gordon, 1983; Bograd, 1988; DeKeseredy, 1988; Kurz, 1993; Pence & Paymar, 1993; Yllo, 1993; Renzetti, 1994; Stark, 1996; Stark & Flitcraft, 1996). These studies propose that violence against one’s female partner is an offshoot of male gender role socializa-

tion, which is based on establishing mastery, supremacy, and authority. In fact, studies do 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., D. G. Dutton & Strachan, 1987; Edleson, Eisikovits, Guttman, & Sela-Amit, 1991; Follingstad et al., 1991; Barnett et al., 1997; Hamberger et al., 1997). The cultural norms around 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., Renzetti, 1994; Miller, 1994; Straus, 1999; Dasgupta, 1999; Dasgupta & Warrier, 1996).

The ecologically nested framework 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, etc.) 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, etc.) of such actions. In fact, this framework allows us to bring the contexts of women’s violence in 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 overlooked. The criminal justice system plays an extremely important part in how we as a society interpret and define events and actions. Since the criminal justice system approaches incidents as isolated and separate from each other, we also end up removing behaviors from their circumstances. Once actions and behaviors are dislodged from their contexts, the result is often a fallacious understanding.

The above discussion suggests that men’s and women’s violence towards their heterosexual partners is historically, culturally, motivationally, and situationally distinct. In addition, the consequences of these actions are also different. For instance, since tradition-

ally our cultures delineate different norms for men and women's roles, perceptions of their own abusive behaviors also differ fundamentally. Women recognize such behavior as a violation of their socially prescribed gender role and readily confess to this transgression (Vivian & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 1996; Dobash, Dobash, Cavanagh, & Lewis, 1998; Dasgupta, 1999). Men, on the other hand, often minimize their violence against female partners or blame the victim, which reflects a greater sense of entitlement to such behavior than for women.

Available research appears to indicate that both men and women use violence to realize their own particular goals. Although both genders use violence to achieve control, women more often 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 aspects of society confer these attributes to men and women's abusive behavior. In reality, men's violence strikes prolonged fear in their partners whereas such behavior by women tends not to produce similar results (Russell, Lipov, Phillips, & White, 1989; Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Neidig, & Thorn, 1995; Morse, 1995; Barnett et al., 1997; Dasgupta, 1999).

Furthermore, the majority of research findings report that women who use violence are battered themselves and use physical aggression to escape or stop this abuse. Studies also indicate that women are generally quite unsuccessful in achieving their objectives. In most cases women are able to neither control violence against themselves nor modify their abusers' behaviors according to their own will (e.g., Barnett et al., 1997; Dasgupta, 1999). On the contrary, most women declare that such behaviors make them even more vulnerable to their partners' aggression (Bowker, 1983; Gelles & Straus, 1988; Straus, 1993, 1999; Bachman & Carmody, 1994; Morse, 1995; Dasgupta, 1999). In the face of such failure, 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 system (e.g., mandatory arrest policies) may in fact, be

responsible for the increase in women arrested for domestic violence. But this claim to gender-neutrality is expressly erroneous. Renzetti (1994) quite rightly points out that the legal system, erected to meet men's violence towards their women partners, is being used as a standard to assess female conduct (see Hooper, 1996).

Indeed, women's violence towards their intimate partners has historically been seen as a contradiction to their gender role. Not only is a woman not supposed to retaliate against her battering spouse, she is not allowed to even fight back. In conceptualizing a battered woman, 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 (see Gondolf & Fischer, 1988). In her reservoir of survival maneuverings, violence may occupy a vital place. Fighting back may be a resistance tactic of many battered women.

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 societies 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 Jones, 1997; Mernissi, 1975; Wadley, 1988). Thus, women from these cultures may not be as inhibited about using violence as their western counterparts. How the American criminal justice system will view this behavior is anybody's guess. We have to recognize the racist, sexist, and xenophobic realities of this system if we want to reconstruct it to fit the diverse population of the future.

Author of this document:

Shamita Das Dasgupta, Ph.D., DVS
Manavi, Inc.

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In Brief:

Towards an Understanding of Women's Use of Non-Lethal Violence in Intimate Heterosexual Relationships

Recently, the 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 of men and women as well as an increase in only women being arrested and charged with domestic violence. Detractors of the anti-violence against women movement have hailed these arrests as proofs of gender neutrality of family violence. However, research on women's use of violence against intimate male partners leads to different conclusions:

- The majority of women who use violence against their male partners are battered themselves;
- The assessment of men's and women's violence towards their intimate partners as fundamentally similar arises from conflation of the terms 'battering' and 'violence' as well as decontextualization of violent actions;
- Women's violent behavior towards their heterosexual partners is substantially different from men's on historical, cultural, systemic, situational, and individual grounds;
- Women's abusive behaviors towards their heterosexual partners emerge from various motivations including self defense, retaliation, reclaiming self respect, and controlling of abusers' violence; and
- Women from different cultural backgrounds may view violence differently. Many cultures may not consider physical aggression to be much of a taboo for women. Cross-cultural perspectives must be taken seriously in a pluralistic society such as the U.S. A limited approach to women's violence may lead to myopic policy development and inappropriate criminal justice responses towards diverse communities.
- Women's use of force against their male partners needs to be recognized by their contexts that include socio-cultural backgrounds, family and community networks, systems and institutions of intervention, motivations and intentions, immediate situations, as well as consequences;
- By equating women's violence to men's, the criminal justice and other intervening systems evaluate women's behavior by standards established for men's violence. Such an assessment is not only invalid, it leads to inappropriate and unjust responses;