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# THE ABUSE OF MEN BY WOMEN

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## THE ABUSE OF MEN BY WOMEN

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*Abstract.* Although numerous studies in the past have shown that men are more often seen as perpetrators of domestic and sexual abuse, clinicians and researchers have recently begun to critically consider the problem of intimate and sexual violence committed by women towards men. Despite the controversial debate over whether women are violent towards their husbands and partners, many research papers have shown that there is a prevalence of such violence. In addition, many studies have highlighted gender differences in the commission of domestic violence in terms of the different reasons and contexts in which violence occurs. This paper aims to present the latest results of research on risk factors, typologies, and motives of women perpetrators of violence in relationships, as well as to improve our understanding of the etiology and complexity of such violence. The first part of the paper explains in detail the typology and prevalence of violence against men, as well as the psychological and other characteristics of women perpetrators. The second part deals mainly with the causes and motives of women's violent behaviour towards men. The last section is dedicated to the effects of treatment and possible improvements. The conclusion emphasizes the importance of this topic and gives some recommendations for resolving the above issues.

## *Introduction*

For a long time, female perpetrators of violence were hidden under the veil of deceit in academia and the community. It is partly because there is an ongoing stigma around who is violent by nature and socially accepted to be a victim. Idriss (2021) highlighted that in the patriarchal society we live in, it is a shame for a man to admit that he was being abused. In this regard, there is a strong belief in the theory that women cannot engage in the same harmful practices as men, or at least not in that frequent and severe manner. The fact that cases of violence perpetrated by women are underreported and that various studies collected and interpreted different sets of data has led to contradictory views in the conceptualisation of female to male violence.

Kolbe and Buttner (2020) showed results of the meta-research analysing 266 research studies confirming the prevalence of domestic violence against men that ranges from 3.4 to 20.3%. The study conducted in Portugal that included 4646 suspected victims of intimate partner violence between 2007 and 2009 revealed that 11.5% (n=535) of them were men (Carmo et al., 2011).

Evidently, there is a rise in the percentage of female perpetrators of domestic violence in many parts of the world. In this sense, Hester (2012) calls attention to the existing phenomena by stating that, in addition to the increased arrests, there is an even higher rise of women-initiated violence reports, from 8 to 12%. Therefore, attention should be undoubtedly given to the issue to contextualise and better understand such behaviour.

## *Who is she?*

Psychological characteristics and interpersonal relations of female perpetrators

Many studies from the domain of feminist theory have shown that gender is a central focus in the field of domestic violence and abuse. Such studies have

suggested that female violence occurs mainly due to victimisation, with self-defence being a primary motivation for female perpetrators to commit violence (Swan & Snow, 2006). Consequently, some authors use the term “abused aggressor” when describing violent women (Swan & Snow, 2003, p. 75). On the other hand, Archer (2004) argues that women also have the capacity for violence outside of the victimisation context (p. 651). Similarly, many studies have reported that both women and men commit violent acts and have found little gender difference in prevalence rates for such actions (Farrell 1986; McNeely & Mann, 1990; Straus, 1980).

However, using the solely feminist standpoint in understanding the issue can leave other aspects of the phenomenon out of the picture. For this reason, psychological, sociological, family system, and other perspectives should be considered for differentiating female from male perpetrators and putting the whole picture together.

It is significant to note an evident lack of research around the psychological characteristics of violent women towards their partners. However, one of the few such studies indicated a high level of psychopathic personality traits, substantial apprehensiveness, depressiveness, and other types of psychic disturbances as integral parts of a psychological profile of women who use violence (Walsh et al., 2010).

Theory of attachment developed by Bowlby (1969) contributed to the understanding of how a disturbed system of early attachment and experienced trauma can lead to the development of violent behaviour later in life. Following the original theory, a number of approaches were developed to understand better the influence of early experiences on attachment relationships in adulthood (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Feeney, 1995; Simpson, 1990). Namely, most of them discovered the presence of two underlying dimensions: anxious attachment and avoidant attachment. Anxious attachment orientation is a characteristic of individuals who have a pervasive fear of abandonment, show dependency and jealousy in close adult relationships, and see themselves as unlovable. In contrast, the feature of individuals with an avoidant attachment orientation is the desire to avoid emotional dependence on others, which lead them to develop only a limited number of intimate relationships (McKeown, 2014). Undoubtedly, individuals with both attachment styles have difficulties in developing and maintaining close relationships in their life. Individuals with an avoidant attachment may display aggression and act violently to control their partner due to the fear of becoming too emotionally involved. In contrast, individuals with anxious attachments may become aggressive out of jealousy and fear of abandonment.

Carney and Buttel (2004) made an important step in the research and investigated attachment styles in women sentenced to or mandated to batterer intervention programmes. Their study showed that these women, compared

with a non-violent group of women, demonstrated characteristics of adult insecure attachment style, such as high dependency on their partners (Carney & Buttel, 2004). In contrast, some authors found more gender-neutral findings regarding the impact of attachment style on domestic violence perpetration (Gay et al., 2013). Moreover, they underlined that attachment style highly predicted victimisation and perpetration of domestic violence. However, the study found no evidence of gender differences in this predictability.

Nonetheless, the researchers have found interesting intercorrelations between individuals' sensitivity to rejection and the perpetration of reactive violence. In other words, women who felt rejected by their male partners reacted with aggression and emotional withholding, leading to the rise in men's intimidating behaviour. Therefore, such reactions in the family system nurtured and facilitated mutual couple violence (Yakeley & Meloy, 2012). Secondly, a similar study found that women offenders have lower rates of skills to "process emotional information and to cope with requirements and community pressure, including that for maintaining close interpersonal bonds" (Rode et al., 2015, p. 61). This lack of competence in women may cause frustration from their inadequate response to partners' needs, resulting in increased anger and potentially violent acts.

Moffitt et al. (2001) conducted a landmark survey of 1,000 males and females from the age of 3–21 years old, a well-known Dunedin study, where they examined personality traits relevant to identifying a possible criminal profile. Results showed that, among both males and females, antisocial behaviour was positively associated with the MPQ scaled Aggression, Alienation, and Stress Reaction and was negatively associated with the MPQ scales Self-control, Traditionalism, and Social Closeness. Regarding sex differences in the causes of criminal behaviour, the study revealed that the overall multiple correlations between personality and antisocial behaviour were similar for males ( $R=0.57$ ) and females ( $R=0.58$ ). However, regression analysis showed that there were a few gender differences in the personality correlates of antisocial behaviour. Results suggested that, among both males and females, antisocial behaviour is increasingly likely to occur among individuals with a high tendency to aversive affective states such as anger, anxiety, and irritability (Moffitt et al., 2001).

Nevertheless, from the analysed literature, it has emerged that there is no sufficient robust evidence showing psychosocial differences among male and female perpetrators. Thus, further studies in this field are required to fill the gaps in understanding cognitive and emotional functioning, personality traits and individual differences of women and men who are domestically violent. (Đurđević & Ilić, 2018). In this regard, it is essential to assess the personality traits of the perpetrator in the pre-trial stage and during the criminal and judicial proceedings in the sentencing stage (Djurđjevic et al., 2016).

## Typology and prevalence of women's use of domestic violence and abuse

Despite the controversial debate about whether women are violent against their husbands and partners, many research pieces have shown that the prevalence of such violence exists. In addition, many studies highlighted gender differences in domestic violence perpetration in terms of different reasons and contexts in which violence occurs.

One of the most comprehensive meta-analyses conducted by Archer (2000) found that women use physical aggression more than men. In this regard, many scholars were interested in recognising differences among these women and their specific characteristics. Similarly, as some studies revealed, physical aggression is not assigned only to men. Therefore, rates of aggression for both women and men used beyond the purpose of self-defence were similar (Banasik & Gierowski, 2015). An additional argument in the literature that proves high partner aggression rates comes from the studies on violence in homosexual relationships. As West (2012) states, women in lesbian couples are highly likely to demonstrate aggression and perpetrate violence towards their partner.

Babcock, Miller, and Siard (2003) developed a model where domestically violent women fall into two main categories: Partner-Only (PO) and Generally Violent (GV). Authors assumed that PO women use reactive violence out of fear of being victimised or in self-defence. In contrast, GV women are more likely to use instrumental violence to exert control. They concluded that GV women were more likely to witness their mothers' physical aggression and to report more traumatic symptoms than PO women, although they did not experience significantly more abuse themselves. The authors state that GV women have been socialised to believe that it is acceptable for women to use violence to resolve conflict (Babcock et al., 2003). The typology's extensive significance lies in distinguishing a context in which women perpetrate violence and explain if their earlier exposure to violence made them start using violence as a conflict-solving strategy later in life. In other words, partner-only violent women commit violence only against their intimate partners, which by no means imply that behaviour is acceptable. On the other hand, as the word suggests, generally violent females are violent more extensively in a widespread way and with other people that are not their partners. The difference in their exposure to violence when they learned such behaviour was highlighted as well—partner-only women learned violent patterns through their adult relationships.

Hines and Douglas (2009) conducted a study to examine characteristics of violence against men in a community and help-seeking sample. Accordingly, males in the community sample used mutual violence, no less than their female partners (common couple violence). In contrast, men in the help-seeking sample were characterized by more disproportional and rather severe acts of violence

and control over their partner (intimate terrorism). Contrary to the previous research, they proved that women also use more severe intimate partner violence, which has more severe effects on men than common couple violence (Hines & Douglas, 2009).

Regarding sexual abuse, women who commit sexual offences were generally ignored by academic literature. The explanation of this argument was that the number of female sex offenders had been minor and irrelevant to bring the research's attention. However, the scarcity of studies does not imply that women who sexually offend should be disregarded. Better knowledge in this area would help in developing an adequate treatment for perpetrators and support for victims. Moreover, one of the most comprehensive typologies of female sex offenders was developed three decades ago by Mathews (1991). The author differentiated three types of women who commit sexual offences: i) teacher-lover type, ii) intergenerationally predisposed type, and iii) male-coerced type. Male-coerced women are described as mostly dependent on their partners and have previously been victims of their partners' abuse themselves. As a result, they engage in violent behaviour to retaliate for the harm and injury they had suffered. Among women abusers, there is a specific group of caregivers who have been misusing their position and close, exclusive relationship with children to inflict harm and abuse (Pavlović & Bijvoets, 2016). In the light of this paper, the focus will be on the third type, as the violent act is in this case addressed towards the partner rather than towards children. It should be mentioned that female sexual perpetrators differ in many ways from male perpetrators, particularly evidenced in lower sexual recidivism rates and different risk factors for recidivism (Cortoni & Stefanov, 2020; Proulx et al., 2020). One study has shown a significantly higher rate of sexual recidivism among female offenders who scored higher on measures of depression, anxiety, and borderline personality disorders (Miller & Marshall, 2019).

Similarly, the researchers found differences between female sex offenders who are solo offenders from those who offend with a male co-offender (Budd et al., 2017; Comartin et al., 2018). Accordingly, their findings are similar to those of Miller and Marshall (2019) in the study on a sample of 225 female sex offenders, comparing solo and co-offending women on variables of psychopathology, criminal history, victim and offender information, and recidivism rates. The results indicate that solo offenders are more likely to perpetrate violence towards male, unrelated victims. They score higher on dominance and aggression and are more likely to generally recidivate (Miller & Marshall, 2019).

One recent review-based meta-analysis based on 17 samples from 12 countries found that a small proportion of sexual offences reported to police are committed by females (fixed-effect meta-analytical average = 2.2%). In contrast, victimisation surveys indicated prevalence rates of female sexual offenders are six times higher than the official data (fixed-effect meta-analytical average = 11.6%).

Interestingly, the conclusion was that males were much more likely to self-report victimisation by female sex offenders than females (40% vs. 4%) (Cortoni et al., 2017). Also, the additional study found that female sex offenders tend to have more similarities with general female offenders than male sexual offenders (Pettersen et al., 2018).

It appears that women are motivated to use reactive violence, expecting that such acts would benefit them emotionally and physically to recover from primary violence. The presented motive that emerged from the discussion is just one possible explanation of why women act destructively. Besides, several more will be discussed in the following chapter.

### *Why does she do it?*

#### The motivation for being abusive

Through analysing available literature, it has emerged that there is heterogeneity among motives for initiating violent acts between men and women, but also root causes that led them to manifest such behaviour. Generally, women were using violence as an escape tactic in the form of self-defence from their violent partners, while men more frequently reported using threatening behaviour and coercive control against their intimate partners to punish them. Taking into account the presented evidence, there is an indication that the overall context of violence has to be considered in the differentiation of male from female violence. However, identifying and measuring an internal experience such as motivation for domestic violence and abuse seems challenging. Sometimes, even perpetrators are not fully aware of their motives. As confirmed by the authors in the comprehensive literature review of 75 studies, 61% of the sample of both women and men reported self-defence as the primary motive, 49% of them said jealousy, while 76% of others outlined the motive of power and control (Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 2012). The authors summarised all available studies that reported empirical data related to men's and women's motivations for IPV. According to them, motivations were coded using seven categories: (a) Power/Control, (b) Self-defence, (c) Expression of Negative Emotion (i.e., anger), (d) Communication Difficulties, (e) Retaliation, (f) Jealousy, and (g) Other (ibid.). However, due to the methodology limitations in data comparison, gender differences could be detected and directly compared in solely 18 studies.

Anyhow, in some of the findings, gender differences in motives were stronger than in others, as follows: a) control and power were found to be more common for men in comparison to women; b) self-defence was more frequently reported as a motive by women than men; c) jealousy was endorsed by both women and men; and d) anger as a solely motivational factor was not reported,



but two papers did find that anger is more common motive women than men. Researchers stated that women who felt low fear and high anger in response to a partner's abuse were more likely to use intimate partner violence to control a partner. And women who felt the desire to escape their partner's abuse were more likely to use intimate partner violence in self-defence. Accordingly, women use violence motivated by self-defence or retaliation and are least likely to use violence to control or dominate their partners (Ross, 2011).

In their study, Graham-Kevan and Archer (2005) proved that, contrary to prediction, women's fear was found to be negatively correlated to their use of physical aggression. This study investigated three predictions derived from explanations of women's use of physical aggression towards their male partners, as following: (a) the more frequently women experience fear for their physical safety during the conflict, the more frequently they use physical aggression; (b) the frequency of physical aggression of a woman's partner is related to her use of physical aggression; and (c) women's aggression is used as a means of coercive control. The study's findings showed that when partner aggression and controlling behaviours were partial, fear was negatively related to women's partner aggression. Namely, 23% of the variance in women's use of minor physical aggression was explained by their partners' use of minor physical aggression; 39% of the variance in women's use of severe physical aggression was predicted by their partners' use of physical aggression (Graham-Kevan & Archer, 2005).

Regarding the killings, as the most extreme act on a continuum of violence, the vast majority of women who murder their intimate partners have a long-term history of being abused by those partners (Motz, 2016). However, not all abused women end up murdering their partners. Which motives then make some women do it? Researchers reveal several factors that determine significant differences between abused women who committed the murder of their abusive partners and women who had been victimised but did not commit such a crime. The factors are the following: a death threat by the male partner, the presence of a weapon in the home related to women's perception that she could be killed, alongside her perception that she is a victim of severe psychological abuse and alcohol misuse by the perpetrator. It can be concluded that women become motivated to murder once they develop a subjective feeling of threat, degradation, humiliation, isolation, and fear of their abusive partner. Accordingly, the above factors were used to formulate a questionnaire aiming to screen the probability of women beaten by their partners becoming victims themselves or committing murder of the partner (Motz, 2016, p. 210).

Some authors highlighted several important limitations of the studies on motivations that should be considered for further methodological, policy, and intervention improvements. That is to say, methods for collecting data in studies were potentially biased, and there was a risk of giving socially desirable answers. Also, all researches were conducted in developed, English-speaking countries

and examined women were part of the treatment programmes or system of criminal punishment and not the general population (Bair-Merritt et al., 2010). To that end, understanding and adequately measuring causes and motivation for violent behaviour and putting it into the relevant context are the initial steps to developing and implementing adequate treatment of domestically and sexually violent women. To date, there is a lack of evidence on the efficiency of tailor-made programmes that treat violent women, which will be further discussed in the below text.

### *How to help her?*

#### Treatment of female perpetrators

Bearing in mind the significant increase in women's arrest and engagement in batterer intervention programmes (BIPs), stating that women are not initiators and perpetrators of intimate partner violence is no longer possible. As a result, according to authors, a system that is currently in place may be helpful only for women who have similar motives to be violent as men, notably to control and dominate their partners (Carney & Buttel, 2004). Therefore, programmes for female perpetrators should be tailor-made based on the findings around female perpetrators' characteristics. Importantly, they should also recognise differences among different subtypes of domestically violent women, as analysed in the previous sections. Rehabilitation, recovery, and resources must be created for the woman's individual needs, with a personalised intervention and support plan being developed (Gilbert & O'Dowd, 2019).

It seems there is a lack of agreement in the literature regarding the most effective approach and assessment measures to use with female perpetrators. Unfortunately, most tools for screening and assessing IPV have been developed and validated on male samples. According to the National Resource Center on Justice-Involved Women, only two assessment instruments have been validated with women who have perpetrated domestic or intimate partner violence:

- 1) Domestic Violence Screening Instrument (DVSI) (Williams & Houghton, 2004);
- 2) Spousal Assault Risk Assessment (SARA) (Kropp et al., 2014).

According to the authors, both instruments predict general offences and domestic violence, with SARA being superior to DVSI in predicting the perpetration of domestic violence when it occurs for the first time, showing greater predictability for women than for men. In addition, SARA investigates psychological functioning and reveals factors that more adequately identify women at risk of future violent behaviour. Similarly, it is also highlighted in the Practice Guides that interviews appeared to be one of the most powerful methodological

tools to advance our understanding of women and violence. It serves to clarify the violence context and dynamics, as well as the sources and the process of conflict development in relationships. A well-conducted interview is proven to adequately measure women's perception of the use of violence and the observed short-term and long-term consequences.

The available research, cited by the National Resource Center on Justice-Involved Women, indicates four main issues that need to be taken into consideration when creating an intervention for women perpetrators of violence:

1. The emphasis of intervention should be psycho-educational with a focus on safety planning, the nature and dynamics of violence, and exposure to non-violent alternatives to address relationship conflict. Furthermore, it is noted that women with a history of violence and criminal behaviour who have multiple needs (substance abuse, mental health etc.) require more intensive intervention.
2. Use of the trauma-informed approach in terms of recognising the impact of a personal history of victimisation on perpetrators, knowing that they are not responsible for what had happened to them. And also advocating for the training of professionals working with perpetrators on trauma-informed care, including learning about consequences and impact of trauma and strategies to be used with trauma victims.
3. Women involved in violence are at greater risk of victimisation in current relationships, and therefore, a relational approach to relationship building and modelling interpersonal skills is recommended in treatment.
4. Violent women are more likely to have symptoms of depression and be economically disadvantaged (to be unemployed, to report symptoms of depression, to report intense feelings of hopelessness and inadequacy). That is why addressing such multiple needs that women face is of great importance. In addition, it is recommended to use Power-Based Approaches, which lies on the premise that all clients have talents, abilities, competencies, and resources that can be mobilised (Van Dieten et al., 2014).

## *Conclusions*

Through analysing available literature, it has emerged that women's domestic violence and abuse were undermined by the arguments of mainly feminist researchers, who were reluctant to acknowledge its prevalence, frequency, and severity. Their statements were not surprising, having in mind the history and majority of male battering underpinned by the broader institutional and societal structures of male domination. However, various studies released evidence on the comparable rates of intimate female violence, which, therefore, must not be overlooked.

There are at least two reasons for emphasising the importance of dealing with female perpetrators as a separate category. On the one hand, compelling arguments showed that female perpetrators significantly differ from men in their motivation, emotional, cognitive, and interpersonal capacities to express violent behaviours. Acknowledging and understanding violent women's specificities is essential for creating prevention strategies and designing an effective response system. On the other hand, a non-discriminatory approach advocated by feminist and other contemporary human-rights centred theories should be applied equally to all individuals, regardless of their gender. The principle of non-discrimination as a nuanced approach inherent to human rights could be coupled with psychosocial and systemic perspectives in understanding the phenomenon of female violence.

This research suggests that the treatment of women who commit violence should focus on personal, psychological, and interpersonal interaction styles within the couple to understand and successfully address violent behaviour adequately. We also believe that existing programs developed for perpetrators of domestic violence should be seriously investigated to adjust practices that are found to be effective for women perpetrators of violence. As a whole, the context in which women perpetrate violence, function of such behaviour, type of violence, and its meaning appears vastly important for detecting adequate intervention strategies. On the one hand, we consider that future programs aiming to prevent violence in adolescent relationships should include content on female abuse against men. It is indispensable to promote such gender-specific prevention programs, as well as to develop and implement an educational curriculum focused on developing healthy relationships, free of abuse and coercive control. On the other hand, according to the findings that some women victims of intimate partner violence may also be perpetrators themselves, comprehensive treatment of women who seek victimisation services needs to assess their violent tendencies. Thus, specialized service providers for women victims of violence could also consider resolving IPV victim-offender meta-research with their clients. In other words, prevention, prosecution, and treatment approaches must reflect different realities of female perpetrators, as it might not be their choice, but they were forced or taught to be violent.

In addition, further research is needed to explain why men stay in violent relationships. Is it perhaps due to the traditional male commitment to maintaining a marriage at any cost? Or is it because it would be highly embarrassing for men to admit they have been abused by women, given the existing social stereotypes according to which a man should be dominant rather than submissive? Lastly, is it because of the economic dependence of some men on their wives? Nevertheless, as the abuse of men by women is largely unrecognised in our society, it makes it difficult for men to prove abuse both in court and with guardianship authorities when they need to obtain consent for child custody.

Therefore, further longitudinal research on the consequences of abuse for men would be required, especially if few previous studies informed about signs of severe depression, suicide attempts, alcoholism, and post-traumatic stress disorder in the aftermath of abuse.

Finally, this paper aimed to present the latest study results of risk factors, typologies and motives of female perpetrators of intimate partner violence and enhance our understanding of the aetiology and complexity of such violence. To that end, by giving the overview of good practices in the area of prevention and response to the perpetration of violence by female offenders, the paper could contribute to the improvement of the criminal justice system. And it can also be helpful to police and other public services that deal with intimate partner violence, specifically focusing on female perpetrators. We believe that youth education is of great importance for the efficiency of the implementation of preventive measures, but also the early detection of cases of violence in intimate relationships (both female and male violence). At last, we suggest that in the light of new evidence, we remain open to new approaches to prevention and intervention.

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## Насиље жена над мушкарцима

### Резиме

Иако су бројне студије у прошлости показале да се на мушкарце чешће гледа као на починиоце породичног и сексуалног злостављања, клиничари и истраживачи недавно су почели критички разматрати проблем интимног и сексуалног насиља почињеног од стране жена над мушкарцима. Упркос контроверзној дебати о томе да ли су жене насилне према својим мужевима и партнерима, многи истраживачки радови показали су да постоји распрострањеност таквог насиља. Осим тога, многе студије су истакле родне разлике у почињењу насиља у породици у смислу различитих разлога и контекста у којима се насиље јавља. Овај рад има за циљ да представи најновије резултате истраживања фактора ризика, типологија и мотива жена почињалаца насиља у партнерским односима, као и да побољша наше разумевање етиологије и сложености таквог насиља. У првом делу рада детаљно је објашњена типологија и распрострањеност насиља над мушкарцима, као и психолошке и друге карактеристике жена почињалаца. Други део углавном се бави узроцима и мотивима насилног понашања жена према мушкарцима. Последњи одељак је посвећен ефектима третмана и могућим побољшањима. У закључку се истиче значај ове теме и дају се извесне препоруке за решавање горе наведених питања.

*Кључне речи:* партнерско насиље; сексуално насиље; жене починиоци.



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