

**SPECIAL REPORT**

**The Emperor's Clothes:  
How the U.N. Hides the Truth of Domestic Violence**



**Respecting Accuracy in Domestic Abuse Reporting**

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## RESPECTING ACCURACY IN DOMESTIC ABUSE REPORTING

Over the years the United Nations has issued numerous statements about domestic violence (DV). It began in 1980 at a UN-sponsored conference in Denmark, which adopted a resolution on “battered women and violence in the family.” Five years later, the UN General Assembly adopted its first resolution on the subject.

Since then, the UN has sponsored various conferences, reports, and recommendations on DV. At the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995, violence against women was identified as one of 12 critical areas of concern. In 2000, an Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) was enacted which allowed individual abused women to directly petition CEDAW.

Now, efforts to stop violence against women have become mainstreamed into the full range of UN agencies that address health, human rights, and refugee protection. These agencies include the World Health Organization, UNICEF, the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the UN Population Fund, and the UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM).<sup>1</sup>

The assumption behind all these efforts is the same: Women are the victims -- and never the aggressors – in incidents of partner aggression.

But does that assumption agree with the research?

### **Research on Domestic Violence in Western Countries**

Over 100 studies have examined the extent of DV in developed countries such as the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, and Australia. These studies have reached a consistent conclusion: men and women are equally likely to engage in partner aggression.<sup>2</sup>

As Linda Kelly recently noted in the *Florida State University Law Review*, “leading sociologists have repeatedly found that men and women commit violence at similar rates.”<sup>3</sup> In fact, some studies have found that women are slightly more likely to instigate partner aggression.

But what about partner aggression in non-Western societies, many of which are less developed economically? Is it possible that males are the sole or primary aggressors in those countries?

### **Research in Non-Western Countries**

Two compilations were searched to locate studies that compared sex-specific rates of domestic violence in non-Western countries. The two compilations were:

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1. Population Information Program: Ending Violence Against Women. Population Reports Series L, No. 11, 1999. An Annotated Bibliography<sup>4</sup>
2. Martin S. Fiebert: References Examining Assaults by Women on their Spouses or Male Partners: An Annotated Bibliography. 2005.<sup>5</sup>

Five studies were identified. Following are summaries of those research projects:

1. Kim, K., & Cho, Y: Utilized the Conflict Tactics Scale in interviews with a random sample of 1,316 married Koreans (609 men, 707 women). Compared to findings with American couples, results indicate that Korean men were victimized by their wives twice as much as American men, while Korean women were victimized by their spouses three times as much as American women.<sup>6</sup>
2. Kim, J-Y., & Emery, C: A sample of 1,500 South Koreans were surveyed. Marital power, conflict, and norm consensus were correlated with marital violence. Findings reveal that the incidence of husband-to-wife violence was 27.8%, while wife-to-husband was 15.8%.<sup>7</sup>
3. Steinmetz, S. K.: Using a modified version of the CTS, examined marital violence in small samples from six societies: Finland, United States, Canada, Puerto Rico, Belize, and Israel. Total sample: 630 persons. Concluded that “in each society the percentage of husbands who used violence was similar to the percentage of violent wives.” The major exception was Puerto Rico, where men were more violent. The author also reported, “Wives who used violence... tended to use greater amounts.”<sup>8</sup>
4. Straus, M. A.: Dating aggression was studied at 31 universities in 16 countries worldwide. Responding to the revised Conflict Tactics Scale were 8,666 students (2,747 men, 5,919 women). Results reveal that overall, 25% of men and 28% of women assaulted their dating partner in the past year. At 21 of the 31 universities, a larger percentage of women than men assaulted their dating partners. In terms of severe assaults, a higher rate of perpetration by women occurred in a majority (18 of the 31) of the sites.<sup>9</sup>
5. Tang, C. S.: Subjects were 382 undergraduates (136 men, 246 women) at the Chinese University in Hong Kong. The CTS was used to assess students' evaluation of their parents' responses during family conflict. Fourteen percent of the students reported that their parents engaged in physical violence. The author concluded, “Mothers were as likely as fathers to use actual physical force toward their spouses.”<sup>10</sup>

### **What Conclusions Can We Draw?**

These five studies compared partner aggression rates in the following non-Western countries: Korea, Puerto Rico, Belize, Israel, Mexico, India, Hong Kong, Brazil, and Singapore. The Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) was the most widely used survey tool.

Among the five studies, the Straus study had by far the largest sample -- 2,747 men and 5,919 women – and was carried out in 16 Western and non-Western countries. The participants were university students enrolled in social science classes, however, so the results may not be generalizable.

The Straus study reported that in Singapore, 27.8% of females and 11.6% of males had perpetrated partner assaults – more than a two-fold difference. In India, 25.8% of females and 12.5% of males had committed *severe* assaults. Straus concludes, “the most important similarity is the high rate of assault perpetrated by both male and female students in all the countries.”<sup>11</sup>

The other studies suggest that in countries such as Korea<sup>12,13</sup> and Puerto Rico,<sup>14</sup> the males in the groups studied were more likely to commit assaults. And in Belize and Israel<sup>15</sup> as well as Hong Kong,<sup>16</sup> the assault rate was similar for both sexes.

Overall, the results from these surveys of over 12,000 persons in nine non-Western countries are generally consistent with the findings in Western societies: men and women are equally likely to commit partner aggression.

### **Reconciling the UN Perspective with the Research**

The UN resolutions and recommendations exclusively highlight male-on-female violence. In contrast, the research in both Western and non-Western countries shows that partner aggression is split equally. How do we reconcile these conflicting perspectives?

A review of the UN statements reveals a disturbing fact: they provide no statistics or hard numbers; they refer only to studies that surveyed women but not men; or they resort to grisly but one-sided anecdotes.

For example, the UN 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action is generally viewed as a landmark document on the issue of women’s rights. The section on Violence Against Women contains nine single-spaced pages of analysis and recommendations.

But the Beijing Declaration does not mention even a single study or statistic on domestic violence.

The Declaration offers examples of DV and speculates on its possible causes. But it never states the incidence, nor does it give any hint that women are just as likely to engage in partner aggression as men.

The explanation for this surprising omission is found in paragraph 120 of the Declaration: “The absence of adequate gender-disaggregated data and statistics on the incidence of violence makes the elaboration of programmes and monitoring of changes difficult.”<sup>17</sup>

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But is that explanation true? The research on domestic violence began in the early-1970s. Almost every study disaggregated the results by sex. It is almost inconceivable that any study would not break out the data. So the Beijing Declaration's claim about an "absence" of disaggregated data is clearly false.

Likewise, the 1999 WHO publication, *Putting Women First: Ethical and Safety Recommendations for Research on Domestic Violence Against Women*, never gives any hint that women are often instigators of DV. Likewise, the report does not suggest that female abusers be the focus of research.<sup>18</sup>

### Engendering Global Myths About DV

Psychologist John Archer reviewed and analyzed 552 DV reports from around the world. His study represents the most rigorous summary ever conducted of the domestic violence literature. His article, published in the *Psychological Bulletin* in 2000, reached this conclusion:

"Women were slightly more likely than men to use one or more acts of physical aggression and to use such acts more frequently."<sup>19</sup>

But you would never suspect that by reading the many pronouncements on domestic violence from the United Nations.

The UN emperor has no clothes.

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### References

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/news/unwvaw.html>

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.mediadarad.org/media\\_fact\\_sheet.php](http://www.mediadarad.org/media_fact_sheet.php)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.law.fsu.edu/journals/lawreview/downloads/304/kelly.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.infoforhealth.org/pr/111edsum.shtml>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.csulb.edu/~mfiebert/assault.htm>

<sup>6</sup> Kim, K., & Cho, Y. Epidemiological survey of spousal abuse in Korea. In E. C. Viano (Ed.) *Intimate Violence: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. (pp. 277-282). Bristol, PA: Taylor and Francis. 1992.

<sup>7</sup> Kim, J-Y., & Emery, C. Marital power, conflict, norm consensus, and marital violence in a nationally representative sample of Korean couples. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 18, 197-219. 2003.

<sup>8</sup> Steinmetz, S. K. A cross cultural comparison of marital abuse. *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare*, 8, 404-414. 1981.

<sup>9</sup> Straus, M. A. Prevalence of violence against dating partners by male and female university students worldwide. *Violence Against Women*, 10, 790-811. 2001.

<sup>10</sup> Tang, C. S. Prevalence of spouse aggression in Hong Kong. *Journal of Family Violence*, 9, 347-356. 1994.

<sup>11</sup> <http://pubpages.unh.edu/~mas2/ID16.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> Kim, K., & Cho, Y., op. cit.

<sup>13</sup> Kim, J-Y., & Emery, op. cit.

<sup>14</sup> Steinmetz, S. K., op. cit.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid

<sup>16</sup> Tang, C. S., op. cit.

<sup>17</sup> [www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/platform/violence.htm](http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/platform/violence.htm)

<sup>18</sup> [www.who.int/docstore/frh-whd/PDFfiles/Ethical%20Guidelines2.pdf](http://www.who.int/docstore/frh-whd/PDFfiles/Ethical%20Guidelines2.pdf)

<sup>19</sup> [http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/entrez/query.fcgi?cmd=Retrieve&db=PubMed&list\\_uids=10989615&dopt=Abstract](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/entrez/query.fcgi?cmd=Retrieve&db=PubMed&list_uids=10989615&dopt=Abstract)