



Introduction to the Special Issue – Men as Victims of Violence and Abuse in Intimate Relationships

Wendell C. Wallace^a and Elizabeth A. Bates^b

^aDepartment of Behavioural Sciences, Faculty of Social Sciences, The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago; ^bInstitute of Health, University of Cumbria, Carlisle, UK

ABSTRACT

This special issue presents a range of articles that represent the under-researched phenomenon of men as victims of violence and abuse in intimate relationships in a globalized world where men are often viewed as incapable of being victimized. This special issue presents the work of scholars from diverse backgrounds and locales. The contents of this Special Issue are an acknowledgment that men are also victimized in intimate relationships and in need of intervention. Despite the wide range of scholars from disparate geographical locations, the authors present articles from multi-disciplinary vantage points that are focused on a central theme, men's victimization and abuse in intimate settings. In so doing, the authors have pushed back against the historic yet still prominent narrative that men are solely perpetrators and women are solely victims of violence and abuse in intimate settings.

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Introduction

Violence between partners in intimate relationships is a worldwide problem (Carmo et al., 2011). Whether referred to as domestic violence (DV), batterer abuse, spousal abuse, or intimate partner violence (IPV), this violence can occur to anyone regardless of ethnicity, nationality, age, socio-economic status, and sexual orientation. The dominant narrative around IPV within research and practice remains grounded in a gendered model that positions men as perpetrators and women as victims (Powney & Graham-Kevan, 2019). The statistics do suggest that women are the majority victim group; for example, the crime survey data from England and Wales suggest for every three victims of DV, one is male and two are female (see ONS, 2022), but these same statistics, as well as wider academic research, supports that men can also be victims (Costa et al., 2015; Hamilton, 2019; Machado et al., 2016). However, for many scholars, even in the contemporary era, the experiences of men as victims of violence in intimate relationships are an unacceptable notion due to cultural constructs

of men and masculinity (Asekun-Olarinmoye et al., 2019; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) and ultimately men are not viewed as victims of domestic abuse and violence (Morgan & Wells, 2016) with the status of “victim” not being applied equally to them (e.g., Scarduzio et al., 2017).

A major aim of democratic societies is the exclusion of violence (Schwarzmantel, 2010). Violence between men and women in relationships is a contested concept that evokes emotional and sometimes illogical responses as well as contentious debates among researchers and practitioners (W. C. Wallace, 2021). The contested nature of violence between men and women in intimate relationships is mainly premised on divisions over the role played by both groups and the division has now encapsulated researchers and practitioners. W. C. Wallace (2021) argues that the division between researchers and practitioners is quite evident and has now spilled over to the realms of activism, policy making, legislation, scholarship, interventions, and the delivery of social services that are based on a gendered praxis, rather than constructing it as a social issue.

Despite denial from some areas of research and practice, the crime survey statistics and academic research demonstrate the significant number of men who experience IPV, as well as the adverse outcomes it creates for them and their children (Bates, 2020). In a similar vein, Fergusson et al. (2005, p. 1116), in their work “suggest[s] the need for a broadening of perspective in the field of domestic violence away from the view that domestic violence is usually a gender issue involving male perpetrators and female victims and toward the view that domestic violence” can involve violent couples who engage in mutual acts of aggression. The guest editors of this special issue advocate that the experiences of men and women who are victimized in domestic violence situations are more similar than they are different. With that said, the guest editors are proud to collaborate with global scholars to increase the knowledge based around men as victims of violence and abuse in intimate relationships, recognizing the gender specific experiences, needs, and outcomes.

Instructively, there exist different forms of violence as well as different experiences of violence. It is therefore critical to understand that one’s gender may provide important differences in the experience of victims, including, but not limited to, heightened use of intimate terrorism by male perpetrators and higher levels of fear associated with physical violence in female victims in heterosexual relationships. Further, it is important to highlight the significant difference between the concepts of aggression, violence, and abuse as the concepts are often contested within academia. This delineation is critical as Geffner (2016, p. 924) points out in his seminal work that, “uniform and coherent terminology is a precondition for effective communication among practitioners, advocates, researchers, and others, especially in light of the field’s multiple controversies.”

Geffner (2016) submits that the term violence is usually used to refer to physical and/or sexual acts and behaviors of aggression, but that it can also refer to psychological acts by one person against another. Similarly, abuse includes physical, sexual, and psychological acts, but also can include other components. Available scholarship indicates that while violence usually refers to isolated events, abuse generally involves an ongoing pattern that may include multiple forms of aggression (Geffner, 2016). In his groundbreaking treatise on partner aggression versus partner abuse terminology, Geffner (2016, p. 924) intimated that “. . . . abuse has been characterized by the use of power and coercive control where one person uses his/her superior position, privilege, or strength to impose their will on another, usually through intimidation. The control may be directed at the victim’s actions, feelings, and/or beliefs.” Based on research over differing periods, it is clear that some women may be aggressive, violent, and abusive in intimate relationships (Powney & Graham-Kevan, 2019; M. Straus, 1980) and that they may use forms of aggression and violence that may cause serious and/or fatal injury to men.

Over the past 15 years, there has been much more dedicated research that has explored men’s experiences; one of the very first studies was by Hines et al. (2007) who explored the experiences of 190 callers to the Domestic Abuse Hotline for Men in the US. They found men reported significant physical violence, experiences of psychological and emotional abuse, manipulation through coercive control, and many were indeed frightened of their partners. Since this pivotal study, there has been an increase in research exploring this, and this has contributed significantly to our understanding and the awareness more generally of men as victims (see Bates, 2020; de Macedo Bernardino et al., 2016; Lien & Lorentzen, 2019; R. Wallace, 2014). For example, Morgan and Wells (2016) report that men in their study who were interviewed had self-identified as victims of abuse, which took multiple forms. The men highlighted control as a predominant form of abuse (isolation of men via prevention from having outside social contacts, and/or threatening withdrawal of right of access to children). According to the authors, the participants also highlighted that their female perpetrators were highly adept at hiding the abuse from others, or falsely accused the men of being the perpetrators, and thus distracting attention. In a similar vein, the findings from a six-city study by Costa et al. (2015) indicated that while abuse and violence in intimate relationships differed significantly across cities, men also experienced IPV as both victims and perpetrators.

Douglas et al. (2021) submits that available research indicates that the experiences of male victims of partner abuse are often denied by both members of the public as well as professionals with the responsibility for providing support to victims of abuse. There are a plethora of other studies indicating that men are victims of domestic abuse and violence in intimate settings

globally (see for example, Aragbuwa, 2020; Brooks et al., 2017; Deshpande, 2019; Machado et al., 2016, 2020; Perryman & Appleton, 2016; W. C. Wallace et al., 2019; Wexler, 2020).

To strengthen the case for a change in the existing stereotypical and heteronormative, female centric narratives on violence and abuse in familial and intimate settings and a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon, an examination of the writings of McMahon (2018) must be proffered. McMahon (2018) forcefully submits that while the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) has been globally accepted and prohibits all forms of violence against women and girls, there is no international legal instrument specifically prohibiting violence and abuse against men. McMahon (2018) believes that the lack of an international legal instrument prohibiting violence and abuse against men, in a similar vein to women, reinforces prevailing notions that women are the sole victims of gender-based violence (GBV). The position by McMahon (2018) is further solidified by the European Institute for Gender Equality (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2018) which states that “it is always understood that gender-based violence means violence against women.”

The special issue

This special issue provides a space to showcase the most current research on abuse and violence against men in intimate relationships such that people will gain a better and more comprehensive understanding of the nature, scope, and extent of the occurrence of abuse and violence faced by men in their everyday lives within the confines of their personal relationships. Men’s accounts of violence and abuse experiences remain lesser explored often due to the many barriers to reporting their victimization to state agencies (Hamilton, 2019; W. C. Wallace et al., 2019). Further, when knowledge of men’s victimization by women are revealed, there are concerted efforts to suppress evidence on female perpetration by both researchers and agencies who use existing criminological literature to demonize men as perpetrators, while using existing scholarship on victimology to only cast women as victims (M. A. Straus, 2006), and this creates a frustrating distortion between perception and reality (M. A. Straus, 2006).

This special issue presents the readership with an up-to-date understanding of current research on men as victims of abuse and violence in intimate and familial settings that is being investigated globally. In so doing, it presents an opportunity to pause, rethink, repurpose, and reevaluate previously entrenched views on violence in intimate settings. Interestingly, many of the articles go beyond the central themes and topics associated with violence and abuse against men in intimate relationships and incorporate other current topics of interest. For example, there is a lack of state-run facilities for abused

men, there are needed interventions and familial support, and there are barriers to reporting victimization by men. This special issue seeks to facilitate a changed narrative on the well-entrenched views of interpersonal violence. We begin this special issue with an introduction. Following this introductory chapter, the empirical articles in this volume are organized by two broad categories, namely: (1) Men's experiences and perceptions of violence and abuse in intimate settings, and (2) Predictors/impacts of violence and abuse on men in intimate relationships.

Contents of this special issue

In part one, we focus on the experiences of men, as well as the perceptions of the abuse they experience. In the first article, Aborisade ([this special issue](#)) discusses the experiences of male victims within Nigeria with a specific focus on the sociocultural barriers that exist in reporting IPV. The article reports on a qualitative study with 52 male victims of female-perpetrated violence and is analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. The findings are discussed in the context of recognizing men's abuse experiences and how this can feed into systems around reporting and help-seeking. In our second article, Lassen ([this special issue](#)) takes a similar international perspective, and explores male victims within Estonia, an area of Europe where there is currently very little exploration of men's experience of abuse. Using cross-sectional national data, Lassen highlights the prevalence of male victims in this area and points to this as a foundation for building future research.

While we know more in the field about the experience of male victims of IPV, there is still a dearth of knowledge around their poly-victimization, poly-perpetration, and the possible overlap or bidirectional abuse. In this Belgian-based sample, Schokkenbroek, Ponnet and Hardyns ([this special issue](#)) explored the prevalence of this abuse in a representative sample of men in intimate relationships. Their study further explores cyber IPV and their findings emphasize the importance of looking at online and offline bidirectional IPV to better understand the issue. The final paper in the first section explores male victims as fathers and specifically focuses on fathers' perceptions of children's exposure to IPV within the accounts of 30 men from four English speaking countries. The findings of this study by Lysova, Hanson, and Hines ([this special issue](#)) hold significant implications for the development of gender-inclusive strategies and for recognizing the need for programs and support for both men and their children.

In the second part of this special issue, we explore the predictors and impact of IPV on men. In the first article in this section, Dim and Elabor-Idemudia ([this special issue](#)) utilize the General Social Survey data in Canada to explore the severity and risk factors of IPV victimization in heterosexual men. Their findings point to the comparable impact that

women experience but also the importance of predictors of this impact. The authors join others in the issue in calling for a more inclusive approach to IPV intervention. This is a theme that follows in the next article, Machado, Mesquita, and Matos ([this special issue](#)) report findings from a systematic literature review of 12 studies from five countries that explores the experiences of men as help-seekers. Their findings demonstrate additional barriers men face in seeking help as well as the potential for secondary victimization (Campbell, 2005) or revictimization by systems who are not currently supporting them. In our final article, Hogan, Clarke, and Ward ([this special issue](#)) explore the impact on masculine ideologies on experiences of IPV through interviews with 26 men which was then analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. They used this to understand how men made sense of their experience and felt this could be used to develop enhanced sources of support for men.

Brief discussion

The mission of this Special Issue is to promote a sense of gender equality in research and knowledge production around men as victims of violence in intimate relationships and support the development of knowledge of men through scholarship, policy, and strategic guidance. This is important to our understanding of men and masculinity as men are often highlighted as perpetrators of violence in intimate relationships and this has produced a “one-sided” view of men that does not include victimization as also being possible. Indeed, this special issue advances the field as it contributes new explorations of the area and from new international perspectives.

At this juncture, it is important to provide a caveat, lest the overarching purpose of the scholarship contained in the articles in this Special Issue are misconstrued. The Guest Editors of this Special Issue are not advocating for an abandonment of research on women as victims of violence in intimate relationships and familial settings. What is being submitted is that there should be a shift in the narrative from a strict gendered position on violence to one that includes every possible victim including men and those within the LGBTQ+ community. In other words, what is being advocated is a shift away from previously cemented positions and ontologies that hold men solely as perpetrators, and women solely as victims of abuse within relationships. Importantly, this movement will facilitate a shift in prevailing approaches to understanding violence against men in intimate relationships by using a “unified integrated approach” (White & Geffner, 2020) that looks at violence in interpersonal relationships through gender neutral lenses across lifespans. More importantly, the articles contained in this Special Issue are a Call to Action that is premised on the intersectionality of advocacy, practice, research/scholarship, and legislation.

Conclusion

This special issue represents an opportunity to celebrate some of the excellent research being conducted globally to better understand the experiences and needs of male victims of domestic violence and abuse. There are clear themes coming from the articles presented here which point to a number of things: 1) the developing global interest in understanding men as victims of DV and IPV, something which had for a long time only been discussed in the UK, USA, and Canada; 2) the conclusions these global scholars are coming to all share the same sentiment – there needs to be a more inclusive approach taken to understand and support men as victims; and 3) the similarity in men's experiences across this range of studies also points to the need for us to work together across our geographical and research/practice based areas to raise awareness of men's experiences and call to action a change in IPV and DV training to better educate those who are seeing men on the front line.

It is because of this, that the guest editors of this special issue express our gratitude to the editors of the *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment and Trauma* for giving us the opportunity to present this collection. We further thank the scholars who accepted our initial invitation to submit articles for this special issue and who were able to submit contributions in the limited timeframe. Although due to constraints of time, we unfortunately lost some contributions, we are aware that there are several restrictions that academics faced in the COVID-19 environment when the invitation and subsequent data collection were conducted, and which impeded research activities.

This special issue is offered as a contribution to the expansion and deepening of psychological and criminological research on male issues, especially those associated with violence in intimate and familial settings. Importantly, the articles in this special issue present new as well as topical perspectives on violence and abuse suffered by men by their intimate partners. Despite this enhanced production of knowledge on this pervasive issue, more research is needed, and we hope that this special issue facilitates an enhanced knowledge base on men and DV/IPV issues in the field of criminology and criminal justice. On a separate, yet inter-related note, including an article from Nigeria, for example, is not just a call to include “the Global South” in any compilation that has “the Global North” as center of reference, but it is also a call to consider a much broader process of knowledge production. Instructively, this special issue adds to the production and transference of knowledge from scholars in countries with an established presence as well as from countries that are often under-represented in dialogue on men as victims of violence and abuse in intimate settings.

Disclosure statement

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