

Research on Violence Against Women and Family Violence: The Challenges and the Promise

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A Broadening Agenda

The national agenda to end violence against women is impressively broad. It encompasses rigorous scientific research projects, model intervention programs, and creative policy changes. Its success has been due, in no small part, to the funding initiatives at the National Institute of Justice (NIJ), Office of Research and Evaluation, Violence and Victimization Division and the kind of research presented at the Research Conference on Violence Against Women and Family Violence. The subsequent expansion of knowledge about the nature, extent, and consequences of violence against women is particularly impressive given the relative newness of the field. Before the 1970s, little research on violence against women existed—just as there were no shelters, crisis hotlines, or any judicial or law enforcement training. There were no dissertations or academic research centers, no national database, no funding, no instruments to measure violence or strategies to evaluate intervention programs with perpetrators of violence toward women. In 30 short years, the shift in “what we know” has been significant (Tjaden and Thoennes, 1998).

In some ways, veteran activists and scholars have met this scientific and academic progress with amazement. Many readers of this series may share this sentiment—amazed that there is a “field” of violence against women that employs traditional social science, public health, and other methods to understand various dimensions of the problem. Twenty-five years ago, it could not be imagined that violence against women and family violence research would find a broad audience and that there would be funding streams and a commitment to influence public policy on behalf of women. Most grassroots advocates did not expect that traditionally trained researchers would be interested in topics like the intergenerational effect of violence on children, the antecedents of abusive relationships, or the long-term consequences of domestic violence. Nor did they expect that support for evaluating model intervention programs, Federal encouragement for interagency and multidisciplinary collaborations, or national data based on rigorous survey instruments would be available. Without overstating the progress, it is fair to say that there have been considerable scientific advances and dissemination of an impressive amount of theoretical and empirical information about violence against women and family violence in a relatively short period of time.

Influence of Advocacy

The accumulation and dissemination of information reflect the interest and commitment of Federal agencies like NIJ and private foundations that have developed the scientific agenda and supported research projects for the past 30 years. However, credit is also due to the strong advocacy communities that relentlessly raised these issues and actively tried to influence the direction of these research endeavors. In significant ways, national attention that focused on violence against women originated in advocacy and grassroots activism that defined violence against women as a feminist issue (Dobash and Dobash, 1992; Schechter, 1982). From the beginning, advocates understood the link between being poor and feeling trapped in abusive relationships. They knew that children are affected when their mother is hurt, that there are long-term consequences when a person lives in constant fear, and that those who use power and control to dominate another person’s life may not give up without deadly consequences. Advocates also knew that women needed more than a temporary safe place to stay—they needed protection and opportunity—and that social support systems had a role in either providing or

denying these things. Governmental agencies and academic institutions were understood to be among the dominant social institutions that needed to be challenged in ways that would increase their accountability to women in general and battered women/sexual assault survivors in particular.

This advocacy-oriented research has resulted in a particular scientific agenda and an unusual relationship among funders, researchers, and practitioner advocates. At best, this relationship attempts to build in systems of accountability, fosters dialogue, and facilitates a sense that research must be linked to practice. It also lends itself to a critical approach to evaluating the national research agenda. There are, however, significant gaps in the research agenda that point to opportunities for broadening the current approach. This paper uses research on women in conflict with the law to illustrate the case.

Currently, close to 140,000 women are in jails and prisons in this county and another 800,000 are under the supervision of the criminal legal system (Greenfeld and Snell, 1999). By conservative estimates, more than 45 percent of incarcerated women have experienced domestic or sexual violence, although many researchers identify a much higher number: closer to 85 percent (Browne, Miller, and Maguin, 1999). Overwhelmingly, this is a population of women of color who live in low-income communities and face limited opportunities for educational or occupational success. They are likely to have faced many of the experiences that are associated with life in poor urban neighborhoods: homelessness, substance abuse, divestment from social services, health and mental health problems, and domestic and sexual violence (Morash, Bynum, and Koons, 1998). Without the necessary community services and with limited opportunities, this group of women is also at higher risk of being in conflict with the law. They may be defendants or parents trying to protect their children, battered women reluctant to engage the criminal legal system, or citizens or residents whose rights are treated as less important because of their immigration status, their sexual identity, their substance abuse, or their past encounters with law enforcement. In any case, they represent a group of women who are at significant risk for domestic and/or sexual violence and have very limited access to legal protection or social services. They are also almost invisible to researchers concerned with ending violence against women. By exploring their situation, gaps in the research agenda become apparent.

Gaps in the Current Research Agenda

Although significant progress has been made in understanding the scope of the problem of violence against women and family violence, a troubling national picture has emerged about rates of domestic violence, sexual assault, and stalking. To date, insufficient information exists about specific populations of women and how violence may have a disproportionate impact on particular groups (National Research Council, 1998; Smith, Tessaro, and Earp, 1995). This limitation takes two forms. First, some subgroups in the population may not appear in the national datasets because of the sampling technique used. Individuals who, for a number of reasons, do not report abuse to law enforcement or who do not respond to English-language survey forms, have a telephone, or reside at a permanent address will be underrepresented (Richie, 1996).

Second, and perhaps more important, instruments that collect quantitative data about prevalence and incident rates are not able to capture nuanced, contextual information about the impact and meaning of violence in individual women's lives. As a result, comparative statements about how much violence women experience can be made based on reported incidents, but it is difficult to make conclusive statements about how violence affects individual women's lives. For example, do women immigrants without legal status in the United States experience battering differently than those who are protected by its legal system? What are the long-term consequences of domestic violence on women who are in lesbian relationships? What does stalking mean for women who work as prostitutes? It is unlikely that women whose experiences are less visible to mainstream gaze will be included in the national samples and, if they are, that those experiences will be well understood.

In addition to the sampling problem, a series of definitional and measurement issues plague the current national research agenda. In most research, violence against women is conceptualized as either 1) battering in intimate relationships by current or former partners, 2) sexual assault or attempted rape, or 3) stalking. Indeed, these were the experiences that the advocacy movement was most concerned about as it began to expose the ways that women are vulnerable to abusive relationship dynamics and control. Most data collection approaches (instruments, selection of sample, research sites) reflect these three areas and reflect them well. They do not, however, typically include violence that falls outside of these areas or women's experience that links all three. The experiences of women who are assaulted by law enforcement officers, coerced into sex as a way to stay in a homeless shelter, raped after performing in an illegal sex club, or stalked by a drug dealer for payment are not typically "counted" as incidents in most analyses of the rates of violence against women.

Furthermore, the dominant research literature does not account for those women who experience all of these forms of abuse *in addition* to physical and sexual abuse by their intimate partner. Young women who are in abusive relationships with parents *and* boyfriends; women in relationships with *more than one* abusive partner; or women who are accused of *using violence*, as well as being victimized by it, are not well understood at all. Steps must be taken to address the serious inadequacies remaining in the intervention and advocacy work in which the antiviolence movement has been engaged.

These inadequacies are linked to a third limitation in the research on violence against women. Initially, a close relationship existed between what advocates "knew" about violence against women and women's stories. The "data" consisted of discussions in support groups, hotline calls, observations in courtrooms, and reflections on advocates' own lives. Interventions were developed directly from what women who lived in violent relationships or who had been assaulted said they needed. There were no predetermined categories, tests of significance, or evaluations of model programs. Issues of reliability or generalizability were not of central concern to the original researchers: women and women's advocates. Safety and support were. As scientific interest in the problem of violence against women and family violence grew, the distance widened between the knowledge generated from everyday experience and knowledge that could be "proved" scientifically.

It could be argued that this gap benefited the field, increasing the legitimacy of research on the issues and broadening the interested audience. However, a benefit for some had unintended consequences for others. If a woman's experience fell outside the dominant definition, it was not counted; it was delegitimized and the services women were offered became more likely to be driven by research findings than advocacy needs. As a result, programs have proliferated for women whose experiences reflect the national picture and whose experience of violence fit the categorical definition (Kanuha, 1997). But for those whose experience has not been well researched—rape victims who are prostitutes, lesbians who are battered by their partners, women in prison for violent offenses who were abused, older women assaulted by their caregivers—few intervention programs exist and, subsequently, very little safety or support.

Implications for Researchers

In response to these concerns, a number of recommendations become apparent. First, because this is a relatively young area of inquiry, it is important that the commitment to designated funding programs that will support scientific work to end violence against women be sustained. Funding for broadening the research agenda is urgently needed. As national priorities shift, continued appeals at the Federal level for a more adequate research budget and interagency cooperation is important. Continued leadership from agencies like NIJ is critical, and such leadership must include attention to the kinds of issues raised here. We need more of the current research, but we also need new and different studies.

Future studies need to include qualitative as well as quantitative approaches; for example, case studies that focus on particular communities, longitudinal studies that include in-depth interviews, and contextualized analyses of the lives of women who have not used mainstream services. The aim is to deepen what is known about the range of women's experiences represented in the national databases and to be able to construct comparative analyses across that range of experiences to design more effective antiviolence intervention programs.

Qualitative research would also facilitate the examination of antecedents and correlates of violence against women. Some important advocacy work has looked at prevention; however, adequate research focusing on the macro-level variables that leave women vulnerable to abuse (e.g., poverty, social disorganization, shifts in employment, and aging) has been lacking.

Including more qualitative research goes hand in hand with ensuring that women whose experiences fall outside the "norm" are included in measurement instruments. Researchers must think more complexly and creatively about what it means to study violence against women, and funding must be directed to explorations of linked or multiple experiences of abuse and of how violence against women differs from other violence. These are precisely the kinds of questions that need to be explored. Basic, exploratory research that focuses on women's lives as the unit of analysis rather than incidence-based research may be one place to start.

Implications for Practitioners

Many fields of research experience a gulf between researchers and practitioners far more acute than that for violence against women. Many scholars who study violence against women consider themselves activists and many advocates collect and analyze data. Therefore, such research (perhaps more than in other areas of social science research) has the potential for strong practitioner/researcher collaborations. This possibility is frustrating when it is not realized, and serious attention needs to be dedicated to exploring the barriers to these partnerships, the elements of successful collaboration, and the dissemination of results that come from truly collaborative, multidisciplinary research.

A key element of collaboration lies in expanding the definition of scientific data and of the kind of skills that are sufficiently academic to qualify one as a researcher. Most important, research questions must include the things that practitioners and the women they work with want to know. Funding agencies and academic institutions play a critical role in redefining the questions and facilitating these relationships, and there need to be incentives for establishing ongoing partnership with community-based organizations. The rewards will be a more relevant body of literature, more conclusions that can be applied to practice, and a more protective environment for women in dangerous relationships and vulnerable situations.

Conclusion

Many women are safer today than they were 30 years ago, in part because society has a much better understanding of the problem of violence against women. The role that research has played in creating a better-informed public and providing support for community services is noteworthy. NIJ has been among the key Federal agencies that have provided opportunities for scientific inquiry into the most complicated questions and thus can take some credit in advancing the agenda to end violence against women. At the same time, there have been differential consequences for women whose experience does not fit the dominant paradigms that have emerged from these studies.

This paper has focused on the most vulnerable women, such as immigrants, woman of color, lesbians, prostitutes, and incarcerated women, to illustrate the gaps in the research agenda and ways to broaden it. Even with the increased support for research, limited funding is awarded to scholars whose work focuses on communities of color. Furthermore, scholars who are from communities of color or those who have worked actively with them are underrepresented in the published literature on violence against women of color.

There are important models being developed to work with perpetrators and shifts in criminal justice approaches. Very little scientific attention is paid to organizing strategies or the impact of community mobilization as a tool to end violence against women. What impact social change activities might have on prevalence rates, for example, is not known, and very few researchers or funding agencies are prepared to add this to the current research agenda.

Despite tremendous progress in the field of violence against women (or perhaps because of it), glaring gaps in understanding leave researchers conceptually and practically unprepared to

respond to the problem. A serious commitment to filling these gaps by broadening the research agenda will have tremendous impact on the lives of women at greatest risk.

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