Guest Editors’ Introduction
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What is This?
Guest Editors’ Introduction

Despite a decade of vigorous investigation and intervention, controversy and contradiction still surround the research and advocacy endeavors on battered women’s use of violence against intimate partners. The debate that has ensued on the subject is passionate and often acrimonious. *Violence Against Women* has taken particular interest in the topic and has been in the forefront of encouraging research on women’s use of violence in intimate relationships. In addition to numerous articles, three special issues on women’s use of force were published in 2002 and 2003. The current special issue is a continuation of that conversation.

Through our respective work with battered women, and the primary guest editor’s experiences in serving men who batter, we know that female survivors are especially strategic in how they navigate the violence and coercive control used against them by the men they love. Indeed, it is vitally important that we, as advocates, researchers, and practitioners, recognize and acknowledge survivors’ use of their agency to navigate abusive and/or battering relationships. Simultaneously, we must also be particularly skeptical of widespread assumptions about “women batterers” that are based on race, class, and cultural differences and concede that women from different social positions have differential access to social services and legal resources. The limited access to social services, lack of awareness of options, inability to obtain legal resources, as well as the failure of the legal system to intervene effectively, often leave women with few perceived options but to use force to cope with battering. The authors contributing to this special issue have attempted to centralize these realities in their work and melded them with feminist perspectives on battering.

The three previous special issues of *Violence Against Women* (2002, 2003) on battered women’s use of intimate partner violence (IPV) were also grounded in feminist analyses and informed advocacy, practice, policymaking, and further research. The conversation was invigorated with the first national conference on women’s use of force in November 2010, “When She Hits Him: Why Gender and Context Matter,” sponsored by the Batterer Intervention Services Coalition of Michigan (BISC-MI, 2010). Conference participants from myriad professional backgrounds, some of whom have contributed to this special issue, asserted that, yes, gender and context do matter when speaking and thinking about women’s use of force in their intimate heterosexual relationships. The conference concluded with the message that we must use a “gendered” lens to frame effective and sustainable intervention services, policy guidelines, and meaningful research. We believe that the present special issue will highlight emergent concerns in the evolving conversation by giving voice to the lives and experiences of women who are often the most marginalized and least understood. The diversity of the contributions in this issue reflect some common themes; for instance, the continuing importance of understanding the roles context and
intersectionality of factors play in understanding heterosexual women’s use of nonfatal force against their intimate partners.

In the opening article, Molly Dragiewicz and Walter DeKeseredy critique antifeminist literature on gender symmetry of IPV in Canada. The authors point out that gender-blind language misrepresents the research on women’s use of violence in intimate heterosexual relationships, and thereby impedes the development of useful empirical investigation, policy creation, and programming. The authors maintain that de-gendered terms have come to shape the public discourse in Canada by suggesting that women and men are similarly affected by and responsible for IPV. The gender-neutral language effectively ignores significant sex differences in intimate partner violence; namely, women are more likely than men to be injured by and sexually assaulted in IPV. It is our hope that advocates, researchers, and practitioners will integrate Dragiewicz and DeKeseredy’s recommendations regarding the use of gender-specific language in their work. Such an inclusion, in turn, will contribute to an informed focus on the structural factors that contribute to violence rather than the politics that often derail primary prevention efforts.

Edward Gondolf’s study delves into assertions that male batterer intervention program (BIP) participants in the United States primarily use mutual violence alongside their female partners and, therefore, BIPs should be replaced by gender-neutral interventions such as couples counseling. In a multisite BIP evaluation Gondolf refutes the claim, as he finds distinct differences between men’s and women’s violence. He reminds us, as Dragiewicz and DeKeseredy do, that there are multiple variations in women’s motives, circumstances, and responses to IPV, and context is essential in understanding the dynamics of violence between heterosexual partners. Gondolf declares that promoting couples counseling rather than BIPs is premature at this time.

Suzanne Swan and her colleagues answer Gondolf’s call for a more thorough investigation into women’s aggression in their intimate relationships. Swan et al. do so by examining how well the CTS2, Sexual Experiences Survey (SES), and Psychological Maltreatment of Women Inventory perform in assessing a group of African American, Latina, and white women’s perpetration of violence and victimization in their intimate heterosexual relationships. Their findings contend that women’s aggression is fundamentally different from women’s victimization. All of the women participants in Swan and colleagues’ study who used physical aggression against their male partners also reported greater victimization. The authors also note that gender differences in physical strength interact with both women’s victimization and perpetration of IPV. They argue that a gendered analysis (Pence & Paymar, 1993), in terms of who is exerting power and control over whom, accurately portrays women’s experiences of IPV.

Marianne Hester uses police reports from Bristol, England to examine gender and domestic violence in the United Kingdom. Hester tracked 128 cases over 6 years and found that women who were identified by the police in Northeast England as “perpetrators” seldom exerted power and control over their male partners. However, in the law enforcement officers’ incident-based approach, devoid of a gendered lens the women were at least three times as likely as their male partners to be arrested for similar actions. This “gendered
“injustice” (Renzetti, 1999) is also highlighted in Hester’s finding that women who had been consuming alcohol at the time of the violent incident were more likely to be identified by the police as primary perpetrators than men who were drinking alcohol during the time of the incident. In addition to context, Hester encourages readers to consider the importance of intersectionality of age.

Michelle Ballan and Molly Freyer also emphasize the importance of context and intersectionality when examining the prevalence and types of violence used against disabled women. Women who are disabled and are survivors of domestic violence are often especially dependent on abusive male partners for care and resources. The authors not only raise awareness but also insist that law enforcement officers, domestic violence service providers, self-defense class instructors, and other practitioners must tailor their interventions to meet the needs of women with disabilities. Ballan and Freyer frame disabled women’s use of nonfatal force as a self-protective strategy utilized to navigate complex, abusive relationships.

Debjani Roy’s practice note provides deep insights into intersectionality of various factors and contexts by presenting a nuanced understanding of South Asian women’s use of nonfatal physical force against their intimate male partners. By detailing the myriad barriers South Asian women face in alleviating abusive relationships, Roy reminds us that women who resort to violence frequently do so because they perceive themselves as without viable resources or recourses. Roy also brings out an additional barrier for women, that is, abusive male partners’ strategic manipulation of the criminal justice system to present the victims as perpetrators. Her work reminds advocates, practitioners, and researchers that domestic violence is not simply about violence, but the gendered nature of coercive control (Anderson, 2009; Stark, 2007) exerted by the batterer in the relationship.

We are especially fortunate to have had Ellen Pence write a foreword to the current special issue—a summary of her 2010 BISC-MI keynote address. In her address, she underscored the importance of analyzing contexts in investigating women’s use of violence against intimate partners. Pence scrutinized aggressive actions by battered women as natural human reactions to continued humiliation, degradation, and brutality. She asserted that women frequently attempt to reclaim their agency and self-esteem by physically resisting batterers’ violence.

We trust this special issue will initiate complex conversations, innovative interventions, and grounded research on women’s use of force against their intimate partners. We further hope that such efforts will ultimately bring justice in battered women’s lives.

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References


**Bios**

**Lisa Young Larance**, MSW, designed and implemented the Vista Program at Jersey Battered Women’s Service Inc. in Morris County, New Jersey. She founded and coordinates the RENEW Program at Catholic Social Services of Washtenaw County in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Both programs address the complex needs of women who have used force in their intimate relationships. She established and moderates the international W-Catch22 listserv providing resource-sharing opportunities to professionals intervening in the lives of women who have used force. She chaired the 2010 BISC-MI national conference “When She Hits Him: Why Gender and Context Matter.”

**Shamita Das Dasgupta**, PhD, is a cofounder of Manavi, an organization focusing on violence against South Asian immigrant women. She teaches at New York University Law School and is the author of four books, The Demon Slayers and Other Stories (1995), A Patchwork Shawl (1998), Body Evidence (2007), and Mothers for Sale (2009).