

# ACWS POSITION ON THE GENDERED NATURE OF FAMILY VIOLENCE

April 2004

ACWS respects the inherent worth of all human beings and believes that no person deserves to be abused. We acknowledge that both men and women report experiencing violence and abuse in the context of their intimate relationships. We further acknowledge, as does the United Nations, that violence against women is a much more serious offense and is “*A manifestation of the historically unequal power relations between men and women*”. In response to this serious social problem, we, we have chosen to stand together with women and children who are impacted by intimate partner violence based on evidence that shows that abuse against women by male partners

Is more often repetitive and life-threatening

Is almost twice as likely to involve being threatened with a gun or knife

Is more than twice as likely to result in beating, five times more likely to involve choking and result in women fearing for their lives, and

Contributes to the perpetuation of intergenerational violence particularly through its effect on children.

ACWS supports the maintenance and expansion of specialized shelter services for women and children in the province and encourages exploration through action based research of the need for specialized services for men within the context of existing services.

In Canada, violence within families is finally being seen as a serious problem that results in injury and emotional harm to women, children and families. Research has acknowledged and studied the problem and has provided a firm grounding with respect to the nature and extent of violence and abuse within the context of intimate relationships. While there are varying statistics about the number of women and men who experience violence in their intimate relationships, the following are but a few of the facts that affirm our belief that violence against women is a serious offense and is, as recognized by the United Nations, “*a manifestation of the historically unequal power relations between men and women*” which continues to be prevalent in society today. <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> NAWL Information Sheet #5 “Women’s (In) 2003

## Spousal Violence Facts

- One-quarter of all violent crimes reported to a sample of police services in 2001 involved cases of family violence. Two-thirds of these cases were violence committed by a spouse or ex-spouse and 85% of the victims were female.<sup>2</sup>
- In Canada, firearm use in spousal violence resulted in 19 deaths in 2001, with 18 female victims and 1 male victim.<sup>3</sup>
- Overall, women are at greater risk of being a victim of criminal harassment compared to men across every age group and victim-offender relationship.<sup>4</sup>
- Statistics Canada's 1999 General Social Survey shows that during the five years previous to the survey, 8% of women and 7% of men had experienced violence by a spousal partner. **Women however reported more serious forms and more serious consequences than did men.**<sup>5</sup>
- According to the 1999 Statistics Canada General Social Survey, female victims of spousal violence were three times as likely as male victims to take time off as a result of the violence (33% compared to 10%) and five times more likely to have received medical attention (15% versus 3%) and to have been hospitalized as a result of the violence (11% versus 2%). As well fear was more prevalent among women than men: **approximately four women in ten feared for their lives because of the violence, while the rate for men was less than one in ten.**<sup>6</sup>
- The dynamics of wife-to-husband abuse are different from those of husband to wife abuse.<sup>7</sup> A research study asking about the motives behind aggressive behavior in couples found that women were more likely than men to use violence to defend themselves from direct physical attack, to escape from attack or to retaliate for prior physical and emotional abuse. In contrast male perpetrators claimed that they used violence primarily to dominate and control their partners.<sup>8</sup>
- The experience of front line workers in Canada, and particularly in Alberta, continues to be that significantly fewer men are as seriously abused as battered women. Virtually no research has been conducted to describe the experiences of men abused by women

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<sup>2</sup> Johnson, H. & Au Coin, K. (Eds). 2003. *Family Violence in Canada: A Statistical Profile*, Statistics Canada, 2003. Ottawa: Statistics Canada, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics.

<sup>3</sup> Johnson, H. & Au Coin, K. (Eds). 2003. *Family Violence in Canada: A Statistical Profile 2003*, Statistics Canada, 2003. Ottawa: Statistics Canada, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics.).

<sup>4</sup> Incident-Based Uniform Crime Reporting Survey, 2001 reported in Johnson, H. & Au Coin, K. 2003. *Family Violence in Canada: A Statistical Profile 2003*, Statistics Canada, 2003. Ottawa: Statistics Canada, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics.).

<sup>5</sup> Pottie Bunge, V. & Locke, D, (Eds). 2000. *Family Violence in Canada: A Statistical Profile 2000*, 2000. Ottawa: Statistics Canada, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics.).

<sup>6</sup> Reported in *Family Violence in Canada: A Statistical Profile 2002*, Statistics Canada, 2002. Ottawa: Statistics Canada, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics.).

<sup>7</sup> Tutty, L. (1999) *Husband abuse: An overview of Research and perspectives*. Family Violence Prevention Unit, Health Canada.

<sup>8</sup> Hamberger, L.K., Lohr, J.M., Bonge, D., & Tolin, D.F. (1997). An empirical classification of motivations for domestic violence. *Violence against women*, 3(4), 401-423.

intimate partners and there is no documentation that men need the same resources, such as shelters.<sup>9</sup>

### **The Role of Women's Shelters:**

The sheltering movement which was originally founded to house and protect women fleeing partner abuse. ACWS currently has a membership of 41 women's shelters that provide an essential public service and are at the forefront of interventions to assist and prevent woman abuse. Last year, these shelters

- provided safe haven for 5,194 women and their 5,546 children fleeing abuse,
- responded to 38,423 callers on their crisis lines (2002 – 2003 stats) and
- were unable to accommodate 8,443 abused women and their 9,017 children because they were full. Those individuals turned away from our shelters were supported in the community to maintain their safety through shelter outreach services, available in many centers in the province.

This network of essential service facilities have become available in all large Canadian cities and many small towns. They disseminate knowledge about the issue, offer a variety of programs to all family members affected by domestic violence, including the children who are exposed to abuse, and in some cases, to the men who are abusive.

### **Women's (In)Equality**

Theoretically, women's equality rights are guaranteed through many laws and policies. However, when women attempt to access justice and the resources they need for a life free from violence and abuse, they encounter obstacles that reflect the systemic nature of attitudes and values that make it easier for violence against women to be perpetuated and not taken seriously. This disparity between the experience of women and men must be taken seriously. For example,

1. When women separate or divorce, their income falls dramatically while men's increases. Despite changes in the law, many men still refuse to pay child or spousal support, and welfare rates are too low to meet the actual shelter and basic needs of women and their children.
2. RCMP and police officers do not do appropriate risk and danger assessments and even engage in dual charging.
3. The legal system has a history of dismissing or underestimating the severity of woman abuse and its impact on children.
  - a. Legal representation, women's advocates, and other systems support are not easy for women to access and are often unavailable in rural areas.
  - b. Judges, lawyers, court workers, counselors etc. often have little or no training in the area of family violence. This lack of understanding can lead to a re-victimization of women by the system through inappropriate representation or failure to acknowledge the significance of woman abuse to custody and access decisions.
  - c. Statistics show that women are often at greater risk for continued violence, including lethal violence, during and after separation and divorce. Perpetrator accountability through appropriate sentencing and enforcing court orders, together with appropriate danger assessments and safety plans must be implemented during this time.
4. Violence against women also has serious consequences for children exposed to it. The attitudes and behavior of the abuser can have profound and lasting destructive impacts on the children's well being even after the separation and/or divorce of the parents. Children's

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<sup>9</sup> Tutty, L (1999) Husband Abuse: An overview of research and perspectives. Ottawa, ON: National Clearinghouse of Family Violence.

services, legal professionals and the courts do not always acknowledge that the well-being of the child is closely tied to that of their primary caregiver, usually their mother and that decisions in cases of violence within families must protect both women and children.

In conclusion, it is the position of the Alberta Council of Women’s Shelters that no person deserves to be abused and any violence must be taken seriously. To date, there is sparse research on how many men may be the sole victims of partner abuse such that they require specialized services and how many men need assistance. We do however know the extent and nature of the abuse that both men and women report experiencing in Canada in the context of their intimate relationships.<sup>10</sup> This information supports the maintenance and expansion of specialized shelter services for women and children in the province and further exploration through action based research of the need for specialized services for men within the context of existing services.

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### Highlights of ACWS Activities on the Gendered Nature of Family Violence

Date	Activity

April 2004

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<sup>10</sup> *A Statistical Profile 2002*, Statistics Canada, 2002. Ottawa: Statistics Canada, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics