

Over half of women in abusive relationships still saw their male partners as dependable

New study based on women's self-reports suggests a subtype of men – categorized as “Dependable yet abusive” – is most common

Toronto, April 12, 2010 -- It's well known that many women remain in abusive relationships with their male partners. A new study by researchers in Toronto and New York suggests that many who live with chronic psychological abuse still see certain positive traits in their abusers — such as dependability and being affectionate — which may partly explain why they stay.

“We wanted to see whether survey information from women who were not currently seeking treatment or counseling for relationship abuse could be a reliable source for identifying specific types of male abusers,” says Patricia O’Campo, a social epidemiologist and director of the Centre for Research on Inner City Health at St. Michael’s Hospital in Toronto.

She adds that past research has underscored abused women’s personal evaluations of their intimate relationships — specifically, their commitment to the relationships and positive feelings about the abuser and/or the relationship — as critical in their decisions to continue or terminate abusive relationships. “We wanted to learn more,” says Dr. O’Campo, who co-authored the study with researchers from Adelphi University in Garden City, New York.

Using survey data from a project funded by the U.S. National Institute of Mental Health, the researchers explored the experiences of 611 urban-dwelling, low-income American women.

- Overall, 42.8% of those surveyed said they had been abused by their intimate male partners in the year preceding the survey.
- Psychological abuse was significantly more of an ongoing problem than physical abuse, while sexual abuse was reported as least common.
- A relatively small number of women (2.3%) perceived their partners as extremely controlling, while 1.2% reported that their partners engaged in extreme generally violent behaviours.

But a considerable number of women felt their abusive male partners still possessed some good qualities: more than half (54%) saw their partners as highly dependable, while one in five (21%) felt the men in their lives possessed significant positive traits (i.e., being affectionate).

Based on the survey findings, the researchers divided the male abusers into three groups: “Dependable, yet abusive” men (44% of the sample) had the lowest scores for controlling and generally violent behaviors, and the highest scores for dependability and positive traits. “Positive and controlling” men (38% of the sample) had moderately high scores for violence and also for dependability and positive traits. However, they were more controlling than men in the first group, displaying significantly higher levels of generally violent behaviours. “Dangerously

abusive” men (18% of the sample) had the highest scores for violence, controlling behaviour and legal problems and the lowest scores for dependability and positive traits.

The researchers say their findings suggest there is value in studying the problem of male violence through the perceptions of abused women, including those who are currently “outside” the social services and legal systems designed to help them.

“The importance of listening to women’s voices cannot be highlighted enough and needs further exploration,” says O’Campo. “This is just one step toward potentially increasing our understanding of how to find additional ways to improve women’s safety.”

The study, entitled “Profiling Abusive Men Based on Women’s Self-Reports: Findings From a Sample of Urban Low- Income Minority Women,” was published in the March 2010 issue of the journal *Violence Against Women*.

About the study cohort

Most of the 611 women surveyed for the research study were African American. Their average age was 35 years; nearly half had children under age 18; and 47% had not completed their high school education.

Nearly three-quarters of the study cohort were poor, with a per capita family income of less than \$300 (US) per month. Forty-five percent were currently HIV-positive.

Almost half of those surveyed (45%) reported that their male partners had experienced serious problems with the law, had been arrested for a violent offense, and had been in jail. Nine percent of the women reported that their intimate partners were both problem drinkers and used intravenous/street/prescription drugs.

About violence against women

Violence against women is a serious social problem and public health issue, both in Canada and the U.S. According to a 2005 report from Statistics Canada, 7% of Canadian women and 6% of men reported experiencing spousal violence at least once in the previous five years. Recent estimates suggest that each year, 1.9 million women in the United States experience physical assault.

Women may suffer from one or more forms of domestic violence. Physical violence includes slapping, punching, kicking, shoving, choking, burning, biting or hitting with an object. Emotional violence includes humiliation, intimidation, coercion, extreme jealousy and isolation from family or friends. Sexual violence includes forced sex and refusal to use or permit contraception.

About St. Michael’s Hospital

St. Michael’s Hospital provides compassionate care to all who walk through its doors. The Hospital also provides outstanding medical education to future health care professionals in more than 23 academic disciplines. Critical care and trauma, heart disease, neurosurgery, diabetes, cancer care, and care of the homeless are among the Hospital’s recognized areas of expertise. Through the Keenan Research Centre and the Li Ka Shing Knowledge Institute, research at St. Michael’s Hospital is recognized and put into practice around the world. Founded in 1892, the Hospital is fully affiliated with the University of Toronto.

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[Full study](#) available from the journal *Violence Against Women* (subscription required)

[Dr. Patricia O'Campo's research profile](#)

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