Husband Abuse: Equality with a Vengeance?¹

Joanne C. Minaker
Grant MacEwan College

Laureen Snider
Department of Sociology, Queen's University

The original problem of “wife abuse,” which feminists constituted in the 1970s, has morphed into “domestic violence” and then into “husband abuse.” We present a case study of the newly discovered problem of “husband abuse,” which we argue exemplifies the complexities of neo-liberalism, neo-conservatism, and feminist engagement with the criminal-justice state. We argue that the myth that men are battered as often as women,
an argument that challenges decades of feminist research, theory, and activism, is constitutive of a backlash against women’s safety and feminist “victories.” We caution that such claims must be read as more than anti-feminist backlash but are increasingly becoming the new “common sense,” the dominant lens used by policy makers, media, and influential interest groups. We demonstrate how the very successes of feminism, combined with neo-liberal governance, the burgeoning power of men’s movements, and new communication media, have given rise to new subjects, mentalities, and practices. As the claim that male and female partners are equally prone to violence resonates with discourses of equality and reinforces constituencies promoting criminal-justice “solutions” to all social problems, the result is equality with a vengeance.

Introduction

The most recurrent backlash against women’s safety is the myth that men are battered as often as women... Of course we must have compassion for those relatively few men who are harmed by their wives and partners, but it makes logical sense to focus our attention and work on the vast problem of male violence... and not get side-tracked by the relatively tiny problem of male victimization. (Straton 1994: 79–80)

This article employs the phenomenon of “husband abuse” to analyse feminist initiatives to ameliorate and empower women through criminal-law reform. A decade ago, one of the present authors argued that the dependence of second-wave feminist movements on institutions of criminal justice to improve women’s lives and lessen sexual and domestic assault was “theoretically, politically, ideologically and morally wrong” (Snider 1994: 77). The 1994 article also argued that the criminal-justice system, because of its structural position in the modern Western state, did not offer the same possibilities for counter-hegemonic movement building as other institutions. Unlike hospitals, schools, welfare, or immigration, the criminal-justice system takes as its stated purpose and official task not to heal, teach, or provision but to hold, discipline, and control. Therefore the classic resistance and consciousness-building strategy of oppositional social movements – namely, publicizing the gap between how institutions are supposed to work and how they actually operate – has no “ahah!” potential. Calling police, courts, and prisons to account by naming, blaming, and shaming means, at most, telling these institutions to deliver gender-neutral oppression. Since the goals of feminism have always been to empower and ameliorate
women's lives, not simply to analyse different forms of patriarchy or to equalize oppression, fighting for equal-opportunity punishment may well be counter-productive.

Our original intention was to look at women as victims and as offenders today, to investigate the continuing validity (or not) of the 1994 critique. However, it soon became clear that today's realities are too complex and contradictory to allow such an analysis. Instead, we have done a case study of a phenomenon that, we argue, exemplifies these complexities: the newly discovered problem of "husband abuse." "Wife battering" – the original problem constituted by 1970s feminists – has morphed into "domestic violence" and then into "husband abuse." The husband-abuse argument runs counter to decades of feminist research, theory, and activism. One of the battered women's movement's key goals was to challenge the silence over woman abuse and decrease public tolerance of it. With the proliferation of "husband abuse" discourse, feminist assumptions, research evidence, and claims – that women are more likely to be injured, that women are murdered at three times the rate of men, and that, when separated, they are eight times as likely to be killed (Jiwani 2000; Statistics Canada 2005) – are under attack. As we shall show, the claim that spousal abuse is a gender-neutral phenomenon has become the new "common sense," the dominant lens used by policy makers, media, and influential interest groups. To understand how and why this has happened, "husband abuse" must be situated in the social, economic, and political milieu that produced it and that reinforces it to this day. This article demonstrates how the very successes of feminism, combined with neo-liberal governance, the burgeoning power of men's movements, and new communication media, have given rise to new subjects, mentalities, and practices.

The article is organized as follows. Part 1 is a case study of husband abuse, showing how husband battering as a social problem and fact/claim developed and progressed. Resurgent men's movements, Web- and Internet-based modes of communication, and the claims of social science "experts," we argue, have successfully constituted Woman as equally violent, aggressive, and destructive to Man. The science-based claims with "legs," those heard by policy makers and media (Snider 2000), are those "proving" that spousal violence is an equal-opportunity occurrence. Part 2 shifts focus from "what" to "why." Its purpose is to explain the dominant social, economic, and political forces that have shaped and enabled the consciousness, law, and policy of today.
I. A case of backlash: Male victims and female abusers

Rationale and claims: Domestic violence as gender neutral

The claim/myth that domestic violence is an equal-opportunity activity – that is, women are as violent as men, women initiate violence as often as men, and male victims are as likely to be harmed as female victims – is a striking example of feminist backlash (see Cook 1997; Macchettio 1992; Straus 1993). The creation of a “female aggressor” to match male aggressors suggests mutual battering as well as an even playing field inside and outside the family. In other words, Canada has a husband-battering problem, but it remains hidden because of cultural scripts that keep men silent and because powerful women’s groups overstate male-against-female violence. We do not challenge the fact that some men are victimized in the context of intimate relationships, nor do we seek to minimize their suffering. Rather, we assert that focusing on “female aggressors” ignores the damaging violence men inflict on other men and on women, obscures who is doing what to whom, and undermines the ideological climate feminists struggle(d) to create, wherein instances of male domination, gender inequality, and systemic violence are called into question.

This section sets out the truth claims of husband abuse, the role of the mass media (including the Internet, books, and newspaper articles), and the new common sense that has resulted. Below we identify three critical fault lines: (1) the use of tautological arguments; (2) connections to larger symbolic structures; and (3) implications. As we shall demonstrate, the problem of husband abuse is primarily a constructed and symbolic one. Our purpose is to challenge the material and ideological effects these claims have had on women’s lives, particularly the decline – symbolic and financial – in support for abused women.

The first question to ask, then, is whether men really are highly vulnerable to attacks from their wives and girlfriends. Are patriarchy and sexism obsolete, no longer ongoing realities in women’s lives? The term “husband abuse” was coined back in 1978, apparently by Suzanne Steinmetz, in an article reviewing several U.S. studies and one Canadian one (the latter with a sample of 52 college students). Steinmetz reported that half of both men and women admitted using “some form” of violence toward a partner and that 12% of women admitted to being the sole aggressor. The Cycle of Violence, Steinmetz’s 1977 book, was the first of what became a
steady stream of writings discussing female-on-male violence. Shortly thereafter, Murray Straus and Richard Gelles (1986; Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz 1980) published the first widely accepted "data" appearing to confirm that domestic violence was/is indeed symmetrical. Twenty years of subsequent research built on this base.

In 1999 social work professor Leslie Tutty published a government-commissioned study summarizing this work. Titled *Husband Abuse: An Overview of Research and Perspectives*, Tutty's report drew attention to a new "problem." Tutty asks why "it is rare to hear" stories of men abused by their wives. She relies on three sources of evidence: community studies, a summary of two small studies of abused men, and conversations with representatives of 40 family-violence treatment programs and men's groups. Tutty reports "many" tales of male victimization, but the family violence intervention practitioners in her sample reported that they saw few or no male victims. None offered specialized services for abused husbands. The city of Edmonton, unlike most cities, where shelters are exclusively for females and children, operates an emergency shelter open to both sexes; however, the majority of residents are women. Vancouver opened an abused men's shelter in the 1990s, but it had to close for lack of clients. Similarly, in Britain, a shelter for men closed its doors because it was not being used. For Tutty, this shortage of victims can be explained only by examining the lack of societal recognition of husband abuse as a problem. The reasoning is tautological: men won't come forward without more services available, but governments will only provide services if men come forward. We argue that just the opposite is true — that an over-recognition of male victimization by women has occurred. Tutty concludes that abuse is unacceptable regardless of the gender of the perpetrator and that services for men appropriate to their need should be made available. Five years later, Health Canada commissioned another controversial report on male victimization, *Intimate Partner Violence against Men*, authored by Eugen Lupri and Elaine Grandin (2004). Lupri and Grandin view Tutty's claims as too "feminist" and strongly criticize the government's attempt to take husband abuse seriously. They vehemently argue that there are far too many services for women, which has served to eclipse the very real problem of husband abuse. While Lupri and Grandin (2004) and Tutty (1999) part company on several issues related to violence against women (the former anti-feminist and the later purportedly feminist), both government documents are tautological.
The argument is a prototypical illustration of claims making, showing the mechanisms whereby husband abuse is discursively constructed as a real phenomenon and a pervasive social problem, thereby challenging feminist claims that asymmetrical violence within the home is the norm. Although some men are emotionally, psychologically, or physically mistreated by their intimate partners, the bulk of the empirical evidence (Rodgers 1994; Johnson 1996; Fitzgerald 1999) indicates that female partners are abused more frequently and suffer more serious injuries (Comack, Chopyk, and Wood 2000). But as articles in scholarly journals, newspaper reports, and Web sites present “evidence” purportedly showing that husband abuse is a serious social problem, and as more and more stories of the plight of abused male victims attract disproportionate publicity, the “problem” becomes more deeply entrenched into the public mind. Men’s groups claiming expert knowledge and first-hand experience as victims appropriate and displace feminist claims. By the pervasive logic of equality discourse, if men batter women, then women (must) batter men too. Thus we see interchanges such as the following:

Q: Why haven’t I heard much about this problem?

A: Lack of awareness . . . little support . . . more likely to be ridiculed than taken seriously . . . expected to take abuse “like a man” . . . Social messages which tell us it is OK for a woman to hit a man . . . This “double standard” also contributes to the under-reporting of domestic violence against men . . . Sadly, the women’s movement . . . has not been particularly supportive of abused men. (“Common Questions” n.d.)

Millions of abused husbands are out there but silenced – or so we are meant to infer. The argument goes in circles, and with each spin it seems to gain more credibility. The “double standard” unearthed by feminist researchers takes on an entirely new meaning.

To expose this tautology, public discourse, specifically print and Internet media, must be more closely examined. Our search of Canada Newsstand, a database of events as reported in major Canadian newspapers, revealed more than 100 articles on the topic “husband abuse,” indicating its wide dissemination. Headlines like “Violence against men deserves attention too” (National Post, August 1, 2000), “Male victims overlooked” (Hamilton Spectator, January 3, 2002), “Studies shatter myth about abuse” (USA Today, June 22, 2003), and “Battered men too shy to enrol” (Calgary Herald, December 2, 2003) are common. They make “sense” because they are inserted into a larger
symbolic structure where equality is assumed to exist and differences between men and women have disappeared. The argument reproduces rather than challenges male domination, as well as obscuring structural inequalities. It is very much about silencing feminist claims. Abuse in the home is no longer a woman’s or feminist issue but a “human issue,” with men and women equally affected (McNeely and Mann 1990). Under the guise of “completing the picture,” the reality of power, control, and conflict in heterosexual intimate relationships is masked; the very essence of the problem of violence against women disappears. Advocates use terms like “partner conflict,” “mutuality of abuse,” and “family violence” to make the problem of male battery real through tautology (Fontes 2003).

Nor do we see groups of men working at the grassroots level to provide support, care, and services for male victims. Instead, through men’s organizations and collectives, men’s groups and anti-feminist critics put their energies into demonizing and punishing female aggressors, rejecting feminist claims of inequality, and challenging the gains of the battered women’s movement.

Because it is hard to find convincing evidence that male victims of abuse are numerous, or that they are trivialized, disbelieved, and considered an aberration not serious enough to require social intervention (Sarantakos 1999), alternative explanations must be considered. We suggest that the prominence of the social problem of husband abuse indicates something else – a counter-movement led by pro-men’s rights groups and anti-feminist women’s groups aimed at re-appropriating male power and privilege lost to second-wave feminism. In an attempt to reclaim lost ideological power, husband-abuse discourse denies that the familial home is patriarchal. Gender parity validates gender-neutral policies that result in a focus on individual cases of violence, ignoring the systemic reality of male violence against women. In short, the social construction of the problem of “husband abuse” not only calls for but has largely brought about a resurgence of gender-neutral politics.

**Claims making through Internet culture**

Ray Blumhorst is a 6 foot 1 inch, 230 pound, decorated combat veteran who served in Vietnam. Ray Blumhorst is also a battered husband. Today he walks with a limp – he says not from war wounds, but from one of his ex-wife’s assaults. Blumhorst recently filed a widely reported sex discrimination lawsuit against 10 Los Angeles County domestic
Scattered among more than 16,000 pages devoted to battered husbands are stories of the plight of men like Ray. In September 2005, a Google search brought up 723 Canadian references to “battered men” (note: two months earlier there were 569 hits), compared to approximately 73,000 Canadian hits for “battered women.” Without limiting the search to Canada, we found more than 30,000 references to battered husbands. According to MENWEB (n.d.), 835,000 men have been “silent for too long.” The following are typical examples:

Men and women are equals in violence... feminists, men-against-violence-against-women activists, three levels of government, and thousands of media reports have all painted an extreme, one-sided, simple-minded portrait of domestic violence as being about a hulking brute of a man terrorizing a quivering wisp of a woman. (Laframboise 1999)

Women are just as violent to their spouses as men, and women are almost three times more likely to initiate violence in a relationship. (Evenson and Milstone 1999)

Still, the newest findings challenge the feminist belief that “it is men only who cause violence,” says psychologist Deborah Capaldi of the Oregon Social Learning Center. “That is a myth.” (Peterson 1999)

Dozens of Web sites celebrate the new “reality” of husband abuse. The sites listed below indicate the proliferation of “husband abuse” claims:

- <www.powerabused.ab.ca> MERGE (Movement for the Establishment of Real Gender Equality), Edmonton-based anti-male-bias movement
- <www.mesacanada.com> Men’s Educational Support Association, Calgary, Alberta, preserving integrity of fatherhood
- <www.mashproject.com> Men’s Alternative Safe House Project, working toward providing men and fathers with
children an opportunity to remove themselves from domestic violence. Opened in Calgary, Alberta, in September 2003.

In addition to Web sites, numerous popular books celebrate the abused husband and aggressive wife, and many of these are promoted through the Internet. See, for example, The Verbally Abusive Relationship (Evans 1996); Philip Cook’s Abused Men: The Hidden Side of Domestic Violence (1997); and Patricia Pearson’s When She Was Bad (1997).

These claims have gained real political power. One has only to navigate the Canadian government’s Web site on the subject to see how completely the phenomenon of wife battering has disappeared. “Family violence,” “spousal abuse,” and “husband abuse” are now dominant. Under the Domestic Violence link there is a 63-page collection entitled “Directory of Services and Programs for Abused Men in Canada” alongside a 53-page document called “Transition Houses and Shelters for Abused Women in Canada.” But a cursory search of programs for abused men listed for Edmonton, Alberta, reveals that few of these places are actually delivering services to male victims of intimate abuse. Most provide individual counselling support (for any problem, from depression to substance abuse), some are nothing more than personal answering machines, and many are listed multiple times. When one of the authors called one of these agencies requesting “services or programs offered for men who are victims of intimate partner abuse,” batterer treatment programs were mentioned first. Another revealing illustration came from the Sexual Assault Centre of Edmonton, also listed in the government’s document. It turns out that more than 90% of its clients are women, not men. The males they do serve are primarily victims of child abuse, and most of them were victimized by other males. If this is typical (and it appears to be), then why are these organizations listed in a directory of services and support for abused men?

Empirical evidence: What’s justifying these claims?

Unfortunately, disparate, decontextualized and sometimes illegitimate findings can be easily cited and are often employed to back up fallacious claims. (Hammer 2002: 95)

Academic research and government-commissioned studies are the primary source of legitimacy for these claims. On 14 July 2005, Statistics Canada posted a statistical profile of family violence in Canada which asserts that “an estimated 7% of women and 6% of men
in a current or previous spousal relationship encountered spousal violence during the five years up to and including 2004" (Statistics Canada 2005). Based on data from the 2004 General Social Survey, the report also notes that the severity of spousal violence is greater for women: 23% of female victims reported the most serious forms of violence (being beaten, choked, or threatened by a gun or knife), compared to 15% of men. Only 19% of men indicated they suffered injuries, compared to 44% of women. Proof positive of gender parity?

The "canon" or "edict" supporting these claims is a biography published by psychologist Martin Fiebert in 1997 and updated in 2001. For example, the article posted on www.ifeminists.com about Ray Blumhorst claims that more than 35% of all domestic violence victims are men (Sacks 2003). The article cites the bibliography mentioned above, which is said to demonstrate that "women are as physically aggressive, or more aggressive than, men in their relationships with their spouses or male partners" (Sacks 2003). Fiebert’s bibliography is often taken as gospel and used to convey the impression that there is solid empirical grounding for husband-abuse claims. His "extensive bibliography" has frequently been called on to demonstrate that women are as violent as men, that women initiate violence as often as men, and that male victims are as likely to be harmed as female victims. For example, on 10 July 1999, Donna Laframboise in the National Post asserts that "Men and women are equals in violence.” She goes on to claim,

According to the National Clearinghouse's wife-abuse fact sheet, “While men, too, can be abused by a partner, research has consistently shown that the man is the victim of abuse in fewer than 10% of all incidents of partner abuse.” And the moon is made of green cheese. In fact, two years ago, California State University psychologist Martin Fiebert assembled a list of 70 research studies, stretching back to the 1970s, all concluding something quite different: That violence in married, co-habiting or dating couples is an equal-opportunity phenomenon. (Laframboise 1999; emphasis added)

To interrogate these claims, we went straight to the source – Martin Fiebert’s References Examining Assaults by Women on Their Spouses or Male Intimate Partners: An Annotated Bibliography (2005), and what we found was revealing. The bibliography mixes popular publications and academic journal articles (16 from the Journal of Interpersonal
Violence alone), published and unpublished works, new and old material (references date back to 1963), as well as including links to Internet sources (e.g., Corry, Fiebert, and Pizzy 2002).

Of the 176 sources listed, at least 80 employed the Conflict Tactics Scale, noted for equating physical with psychological violence. Another 50 sampled only college or university students in dating relationships. Nineteen sampled selective groups (e.g., only women identified as “aggressive,” only males, or military couples), and of these 11 studied high school students and youth (some as young as 10 years old). Twenty-four were review studies, many citing sources included on the primary list. Many studies cited were flawed or outdated. Three of the studies cited (Feather 1996; Gonzalez 1997; Milardo 1998) used hypothetical scenarios. For example, N.T. Feather (1996) presented participants with a hypothetical scenario in which either a husband or wife had perpetrated domestic violence and evaluated participants’ reactions. The study found that most participants were more sympathetic to the wife and viewed husbands as deserving of harsher penalties. Denise Gonzalez’s unpublished master’s thesis (1997) surveyed 225 female college students, probing for information about histories and rationales for initiating violence and having them respond to eight conflict scenarios. Fifty-five percent of participants admitted to initiating physical aggression toward their male partners, usually as a spontaneous reaction to frustration. Milardo’s (1998) research, relying on a sample of 180 college students (88 men, 72 women), found that 83% of the women, but only 53% of the men, indicated that they would be “somewhat likely” to hit their partner. This finding was based on asking participants whether they would be likely to hit a partner in several common situations in dating relationships. On such slender bases, then, an equal-opportunity social problem has been created.

Despite these weaknesses, Fiebert’s (2001) bibliography carries impressive scholarly weight. The “empirical evidence” he has compiled, and studies published by reputable, respected sources such as Statistics Canada, are seized, publicized, and celebrated by anti-feminist journalists and conservative men’s groups.

One does not have to look far to see the results. Statistics Canada has retreated to gender-neutral “family violence research” (DeKeseredy and Kelly 1993; DeKeseredy and Schwartz 2003),
eschewing gender-specific definitions of violence in intimate relationships employed earlier (in the Violence Against Women Survey and the Canadian National Survey on Woman Abuse in University and College Dating). As DeKeseredy and Schwartz (2003) assert, backlash politics have had a whiplash effect on workers and abuse survivors. It becomes more difficult to garner much-needed support and resources. As we will argue below, husband-abuse claims are used as a rationale to further reduce resources for women’s groups, shelters, and other social-support services for female victims of male violence (Jiwani 2000).

2. Situating husband abuse: Analysis and implications

Removing male privilege – the successes of feminist movements

To understand why Canada in particular (and Anglo-American democracies overall) has been so ready to accept claims that spousal abuse is gender neutral, we must go back to 1970 and examine not the failures of feminism but its real and enduring successes. Over the past 35 years, feminists throughout the developed world have achieved remarkable victories, revolutionizing dominant institutions, laws, tolerance levels, and subjectivities. A genderquake has been launched (Wolf 1993), the aftershocks of which will be with us for generations (Mann 2000). Second-stage feminism first hit the public stage in Canada with the formation of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women (1967), followed by the Office of Equal Opportunity (1971) and the National Commission on the Status of Women (1972). A decade later, when statistical studies showed that formal equality had not produced substantive equality, the principle of equal pay for work of equal value was introduced in all workplaces receiving federal funding (Fudge 2002). With high-level public backing, then, feminists and their allies began the job of transforming the fabric of late-modern society as lived in the Canadian state. Building on decades of struggle, a series of statutes and legal decisions gave women new rights to abortion and birth control, to matrimonial assets and child support after divorce, and to virtually all jobs and professions. (One of the last barriers fell in 1989 when women won the rather dubious right to take combat roles in the Canadian military.) Alongside gender-specific legislation, the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, passed in 1982, officially established equal rights for all (Comack 1999). Liberal feminists – predominantly middle-class, well-educated white women – became a force in law, academe, media, education, and professional and institutional life in Canada.
Thus much progress was made. Women’s opportunities for jobs, education, benefits, affluence, and independence increased. So did women’s expectations of men, and their/unour unwillingness to accept or excuse bad (male) behaviour. Rape and domestic-assault laws were revised; policies banning sexual and workplace harassment became common. One predictable, indeed inevitable, response to this very successful bid for power was the emergence of resistance (Foucault 1977; Faludi 1991). Voices in media and government began proclaiming that the pendulum had swung too far. Men, it was claimed, were now the disadvantaged and oppressed sex.

**Making lives harder – dismantling the welfare state**

Resistance and resentment were reinforced by concomitant economic changes, changes that destroyed much of the social safety net and removed many of the benefits associated with the Keynesian welfare state (Fudge and Cossman 2002). Starting in the 1980s, powerful economic elites persuaded state actors to embark on wide-ranging programs of neo-liberal “reform.” Citing globalization, government deficits, and the need to compete internationally with low-wage countries, these “reforms” systematically targeted government programs, benefits, and regulations. From (un)employment insurance to minimum wage to welfare rates, benefits were reshaped or cut. Working conditions deteriorated, job and wage cuts proliferated, and unemployment increased. In the public sector, privatization – “the amalgam of neoliberal and neoconservative strategies that marks the dismantling of the welfare state” (Martin 2002: 355) – became the one-stop solution for everything from inefficiency to deficits. Out-sourcing and union-destroying “right to work” laws began to appear. Those still employed saw fewer benefits, lower wages, and longer hours of work. At the societal level, income inequality increased. Throughout the 1990s, incomes grew exponentially for those at the top of the income distribution hierarchy, while those in the bottom quintiles suffered both real and relative declines (Schrecker 2001). Tax law (Philips 2002), retirement income (Condon 2002), immigration (Macklin 2002), and health care (Gilmore 2002) were “rethought,” and refashioned to fit neo-liberal priorities.

Neo-liberal governance required the constitution of a new subject, the responsibilized individual. The goal of government was no longer to deliver social justice or full employment or to guarantee minimum standards of living to those on the bottom. Social safety nets, it was argued, discourage people from making prudent investments in their
future (and make people less willing to take whatever minimum-wage jobs the private sector wishes to offer). Over the last two decades consumers (not citizens any more) have been “set free” from the yoke of government, free to sell (and to “brand”!) their skills, wombs, genes, bodies, and identities. As noted above, the result has been extensive privatization, the fraying of the social safety net, and sharply heightened levels of inequality (Cossman and Fudge 2002; Schrecker 2001).

While these policy shifts affected all men, women, and children, groups were differentially affected. The virtues of neo-liberalism – self-reliance, independence, marketing oneself as a product – are difficult to realize if you are poor, young, female, single, uneducated, disabled, or marginalized by race or ethnicity. When governments turn responsibilities for day care, elder care, and health care over to the private sector, those unable to pay for services are punished. When retirement income is privatized, those who have been excluded from the labour market (mothers and caregivers) and those who have never earned much (seasonal workers, immigrants, poor people) suffer most.¹⁰

But many men were also hard hit. Neo-liberal changes produced “a sharp deterioration in the labour market position of young men” (Fudge and Cossman 2002: 25). Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, unionized, well-paid, secure jobs disappeared, and young working-class men suffered – they lost earning potential, income, security, status, and power. They could no longer expect to find a secure job, bring home a “family wage,” or provide the necessities of life; both partners had to find jobs outside the home. It now takes the combined wages of two breadwinners to provide the equivalent in purchasing power to the wage one full-time breadwinner (usually male) received in 1975 (Fudge and Cossman 2002). Women’s power within and outside the home increased. Wives’ benefits and entitlements were no longer tied to a wage-earning husband but, rather, depended on their own positions in the labour market. And, since job opportunities for some women (educated, middle class, white) increased throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the female partner often snagged the better job, thus reversing the dependence equation (Vosko 2004). Real declines in wages also fuelled male anger. In the bellwether United States, “real hourly earnings fell from 1973 to 1998”; from 1979 to 1999 income inequality increased 19%; and hours of work per week rose (Vosko 2004: 95). While Canadian unions were stronger and minimal social-safety-net provisions are still in place, daily life became more
competitive, uncaring, and unequal (Fudge and Cossman 2002). Many people – men and women – are worse off materially than they were 30 years ago. Welfare and (un)employment benefits are harder to obtain and retain, education is increasingly expensive, and “good jobs,” jobs with prospects and security, are increasingly unavailable. Those in the bottom third of the income pyramid, especially young, black, or Native people, face greater surveillance and demonization.

Results: Anti-feminist backlash

Women’s successes and male economic, political, and ideological losses, then, have provided fuel for widespread resistance and what has been called anti-feminist backlash (Faludi 1989). Many institutions today are questioning, if not reversing, feminist-inspired initiatives: in education, boys are now portrayed as disadvantaged; in the workplace, female sexual harassment is seen as out of control. The identity labelled “feminist” has been transformed from badge of honour to stigma (Masuch 2004). In 1998 Canada’s federal government, the body that established the inquiries and commissions that put feminism on the policy map in the first place, eliminated all subsidies to the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (Fudge 2002). Fathers’ rights groups, claiming rampant discrimination in family courts, began demanding that laws on custody be rewritten (Mann 2002). The United States, which exerts enormous influence on every aspect of life in Canada, faces the very real danger that its Supreme Court will abolish abortion rights won in 1973 (via Roe v. Wade). Moral panics about “epidemics” of violent girls, female stalkers, and homicidal mothers fill newspapers and magazines, videos, and the Internet. Women and girls are depicted as the equals of men: equally violent, aggressive, and sadistic (Pearson 1995, 1997; Dutton 1994; Laframboise 1996, 1998). Stories that reflect unfavourably on “feminists” receive massive prime-time media coverage. In November 1998, for example, in a series of front-page articles, the National Post ran a series of articles on shelters for abused women in which “feminists” running shelters were portrayed as self-serving, power-hungry women driven by anti-male ideology. (Note the choice of words: both “feminist” and “ideology” convey negative messages.) Interviews with selected shelter clients bolstered the claim (Laframboise 1998).

Thus it is not surprising that husband abuse is widely accepted as real, or that women today are constructed as equally violent. These claims
are made in the prestigious languages of science; they resonate with well-established, powerful discourses of equality and risk. Such factors facilitate their cultural penetration and make them appear both salient and relevant. As social problem and claim, husband abuse reflects and simultaneously reinforces the "mentalities and sensibilities" of our time (Garland 1990, 2001). Seeing the world through lenses of equality has become simple common sense. However, its effects are neither simple nor benign. Discourses of equality and risk transmit important gender-neutralizing, gender-denying messages, messages with real, often deleterious effects. Translating social issues—inequality, poverty, and racism—into risk categories where chances of victimization and criminality are expressed in statistical terms makes invisible many crucial differences. When categories such as class, race, and gender do not appear in the actuarial charts and tables of "experts," they tend to disappear from discourse as well, or they are dismissed as yesterday's knowledge: outdated, obsolete, out of sync with modern sensibilities. Or, most serious of all, they are translated into languages that actually legitimize increased repression. Thus criminalized women with the most extensive histories of poverty, exploitation, and abuse, those who need the most humane treatment and resources to rebuild their lives, receive instead longer sentences and more punitive treatment in maximum-security environments. When converted into risk categories, their manifold and desperate needs signal "high-risk offender" (Hannah-Moffat 2001; Carlen 2002).

Ironically, the claim of equality, now used against women as often as not, was formerly an organizing cry for groups seeking female empowerment. Battles to reform laws on sexual and domestic assault provided evidence showing that, in law and in courtrooms, male perpetrators were excused while female victims were blamed (in rape and sexual assault cases) or silenced and ignored (in cases of domestic assault) (Smart 1989, 1995; Snider 1985). Battles to end the abuse of criminalized women and to secure rights and programs for the incarcerates also made equality claims, with groups arguing that differences in treatment and opportunities for male versus female prisoners violate the Charter (Hannah-Moffat 2001; Hannah-Moffat and Shaw 2000). Although it quickly became apparent that equality discourse was a dangerous, two-edged sword (Smart 1989), it was one of the few tools available at that time.

Today the compulsion to (re)discover and (re)assert equality between men and women permeates cultural, political, economic, and social life, particularly in English-language capitalist democracies. Virtually
every social problem and issue has been reinterpreted in terms of
gender equality. If fathers are the prime culprits in child sexual abuse,
mothers must be equally likely to offend. If boys bully, so do girls. If
violent male gangs are a problem, there must be violent female gangs.
And they will be found: in the United Kingdom the "ladette"
phenomenon is a media staple. With little regard for empirical
evidence, female groups are portrayed as exact parallels to "the lads,"
equal in size, aggression, and danger to the public (Worrall 2002). In
Canada moral panics centred on sadistic antisocial women and violent
thrill-seeking girl gangs are common, fuelled by the notorious real-life
examples of Karla Homolka and the murderous assault on teenager
Reena Virk. And now, in the area of domestic abuse, the logic that
the existence of battered wives "proves" the existence of battered
husbands, and the allied assumption that women inflict equally
serious injuries and psychological damage, permeates dominant
culture. However few battered husbands there actually are, they will
be "found," publicized, and hailed as examples of a reality formerly
obliterated by man-hating feminists.

The effect is an ongoing cultural denial of the reality of unequal
victimization. Portraying spousal violence as gender neutral sends
powerful political messages, messages that justify "an ideological and
moral retreat" by professionals and policy makers (Worrall 2002: 48).
Denying the victimization of women is not merely politically and
culturally attractive; it is a potential money-saver. If men and women
are equally likely to batter, why should governments provide
specialized counsellors for rape victims or costly gender-specific
programs and institutions?

However, portraying reality this way requires a highly selective
reading of extant empirical literatures. Numerous studies document
the long-established fact that the percentage of female batterers, child
sex abusers, and violent girls is much lower than that of males; in most
offences, the sex ratio discrepancy is close to 10:1 (Chesney-Lind 1987;
Despite much-lauded and well-publicized studies "proving" that
sexual abuse of children by mothers is almost as common as that by
fathers (Welldon 1988), in 1999 only 16 women were imprisoned for
sex offences in all of England and Wales; in contrast, there were 2,492
male offenders (Worrall 2002: 51). Another U.K. study looking at all
assault cases reported to police in 1999 found that 81% were male-on-
female assault and only 8% were female-on-male (Stanko 2001).
A similar Canadian study found that 80% of spousal violence, 75%
of physical child abuse, and 100% of child sexual abuse involves male perpetrators (Mann 2000: 31). Those studies of domestic violence that present evidence of gender equivalence (Straus 1993; Straus and Gelles 1986; Straus et al. 1980; Kennedy and Dutton 1989) turn out, on closer analysis, to tell a very different story. Conflict scales that equate verbal and physical violence hide the fact that female violence against men is usually defensive and fail to mention that women are usually the help-seeking party (Comack et al. 2000). The fact that women victims of spousal violence are much more likely to be injured, and much more likely to suffer serial assaults, also disappears (Statistics Canada 2005).

Implications and conclusion

This study has shown how a new de-gendered consciousness of family violence has seized the public imagination and come to dominate policy agendas. As we have seen, feminist initiatives to force states and societies to take wife abuse seriously were successful. However, when combined with neo-liberal governance, the rising power of men’s movements, and the Internet, they have given rise to new subjects – the abused husband and his binary counterpart, the battering wife. At the policy level, this has produced gender-neutral approaches to what officials now call “family violence.”

The claim that male and female partners are equally prone to violence is made by powerful groups, resonates with discourses of equality, and reinforces constituencies promoting criminal-justice “solutions” to all social problems. Men’s movements and pro-status-quo women’s groups ensure public prominence for such claims, while social-science experts confer legitimacy. The quest to discover, document, and publicize the hypothesized “missing” male victim (and to criminalize the hypothesized female offender) can thus be situated in the social, political, and cultural conditions that produced it.

The consequences for women, particularly those disadvantaged by class and ethnicity, have been more negative than positive. The invention and celebration of “husband abuse” makes it more difficult to deal with real power imbalances between male and female partners and easier to ignore or explain away empirical evidence showing that family violence usually means wife abuse. For men and men’s groups, if women are really “just as bad as men,” it becomes acceptable – even legitimate – to avoid dealing with the causes and consequences of the still ubiquitous reality of male violence against women. When policy makers take husband-abuse claims at face value, resources allocated to
rape crisis centres, shelters, and services for battered women can be reduced or eliminated. Feminist scholars are forced into defensive postures to prevent the erosion of gains already won (or so it was believed) and away from gender analyses that help us to understand and respond constructively to the realities of intimate violence. The social and cultural conditions that reinforce violent solutions create more desperate citizens, and ever more desperate social orders are ignored, silenced, or obscured. And the struggle to build safer societies becomes a battle over which sex should be punished more (Snider 1998).

Was this result inevitable? Predictable? Should feminist groups have seen it coming and prevented it? Such questions are impossible to answer, as they originate from problematic modernist assumptions that the social and physical world can, with sufficient knowledge and intervention, be foreseen and controlled. This, we would argue, is a flawed ontological view. It ignores reflexivity and fails to recognize the complex, interactive, constitutive relationship between knowledge claims and relations of power. However, this does not mean that those seeking to promote empowerment and equality should just give up. Other strategies, both political and intellectual, are available. We might start by paying more conceptual attention to habitus, to the structural realities that shape “common sense.” This means we need to ask not merely what knowledge claims are made, and by whom, but also how and why certain claims are celebrated while others, equally or even better supported, are ignored. Why, in the late twentieth century, did it suddenly seem “sensible” to assume that men and women are equally violent? How do structural realities – the mammoth and increasing inequalities of economic, political, ideological, and cultural capital – shape what becomes “common sense”? On the political front, how can we make it more difficult to appropriate knowledge claims meant to ameliorate and empower into agendas that promote punishment and inequality? What strategies might reach beyond the limited terrain of criminal justice and “equality” battles and offer potential for real ameliorative change? What types of knowledge best resist cooptation? These, we would argue, are questions worth asking.

Notes

1. The authors would like to thank the editors for their support and assistance.
2. Glenn Sacks is a men’s and fathers’ issues columnist and nationally syndicated radio talk-show host in the United States.

3. Similar Web sites proliferating claims about husband abuse include, but are not limited to, www.fathers.ca, (Fathers Canada 4 Justice), which argues that violence is not a gender issue; www.cyberparent.com, which has links to Martin Fiebert; and www.menweb.org, MenWeb, which contains a page that almost replicates the government of Canada Web site.

4. The General Social Survey’s 1999 Spousal Violence Data, released as part of Statistics Canada’s annual Family Violence in Canada: Statistical Profile, is another example of how empirical evidence is used to support claims of male victimization and challenge the 1993 Violence Against Women Survey results.

5. Since we began the research and writing for this article, Fiebert has updated the bibliography, which previously contained 122 citations (99 empirical studies and 23 reviews and/or analyses).

6. The Conflict Tactics Scale is a problematic measurement tool for: failing to acknowledge contextual factors that underpin and increase women’s vulnerability to gender-based violence; not examining the full spectrum of violence against women and ignoring the socio-economic and political context in which women live.

7. The inclusion of research by Walter DeKeseredy and Martin Schwartz (2003) is particularly fascinating, given their work in the area of violence against women and their recent publication, “Backlash and Whiplash: A Critique of Statistics Canada’s 1999 General Social Survey on Victimization” (2003), which is highly sceptical of husband-abuse claims.

8. The most striking reference included in the bibliography was Gerhart Saenger’s 1955 study, “Male and Female Relations in the American Comic Strip.” Saenger (1955) examined 20 editions of all comic strips in New York City newspapers in 1950. The results “showed” that husbands were victims of aggression in 63% of conflict situations, while wives were victims in 39% of situations; wives were more aggressive in 73% of domestic situations and “equally” aggressive in 10%. Men were more violent than their wives in only 17% of the comics.
9. Resistance to this policy has been fierce. With feminism losing power and credibility in the 1990s and neo-liberal cost-cutting measures in full force, the federal government became increasingly reluctant to enforce this provision. Federal public-sector employees won many court victories until on 29 October 1999, the Treasury Board agreed to pay compensation to women for past injustices. But, by that time, wages and working conditions in the public sector had already been equalized: both sexes are now treated as poorly as women once were – a pyrrhic victory indeed (Fudge 2002).

10. Ironically, state intervention, portrayed as wasteful and inefficient when used to support people in need, suddenly became “essential” when used to coerce and control (Snider 1998; Martin 2002). As people on the bottom get more desperate, the relatively privileged get more fearful. As long as “criminals,” “welfare cheats,” “violent girls,” and “squeegee kids” are the object of repression, as long as these controls are directed against Them and not Us, coercion is legitimate and politically popular.

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