

# **A Practitioner's Response to: "Addressing Violence by Female Partners Is Vital to Prevent or Stop Violence Against Women: Evidence From the Multisite Batterer Intervention Evaluation," by Murray Straus, *Violence Against Women*, 20, 889-899**

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In my work with survivor support agencies and batterer intervention programs, I have established one prison-based and two community-based programs for women of diverse ethnic, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds who have used force against their partners. These experiences have informed my belief that “women’s violence,” as Straus refers to it, must be interpreted in the broader context of the relationship. When evaluating this violence in context, women’s use of force against intimate male partners may be more accurately characterized as resistive and self-defensive, as opposed to the “mutual combat” Straus suggests. In my experience, from women’s first call for an intake assessment in community-based programs, they often take complete responsibility for what has happened and, in many cases, also take responsibility for what their male partner did to them. The women also typically want to know how they can get help for their male partners who have abused them. The women often articulate an internalized shame and self-hatred for using the actions that resulted in their court-ordered intervention. These feelings seem to mask any self-identification with a domestic violence survivorship history (Larance & Rousson, in press). During intake, and throughout the group processes, women volunteer nuanced details including, for example, whether they used a knife, the size of the knife, where they found it, where the presenting incident took place, what they were wearing, what the room smelled like, and what they hoped to change by resorting to actions they had not previously considered. The women seem acutely tuned-in to doing something that they never thought they would do. In contrast, from the time men first call the batterer intervention programs I have worked with and supervised, and through much of their programming, they tend to claim the following: “I didn’t do it,” “She is a manipulative bitch,” “She’s lying,” “She just wants my money,” and/or “She is just trying to get custody of the kids.” The men’s responses throughout intervention are strikingly different from those of the women I have worked with. As a practitioner involved in the lives of

women and men who have used violence in their relationships, I believe it is inaccurate to make the generalizations that Straus makes from superficial, decontextualized accounting of physical tactics.

Furthermore, the focus on women's tactics does not better inform our understanding of intimate partner violence. We need a contextual analysis that includes relationship history, trauma history, structural factors including economics, access to resources, and more. We also need to ask questions that address an individual's ability to effectively establish and maintain coercive control in the relationship—questions that capture the essence of his, in the words of Stark (2007), "micro-regulation" of her daily life such as: Do you dread his presence? Are there things he does to you that no one else seems to understand? Does he check up on you? In my experience, women's partners are able to establish and then effectively harness fear and control of the women they abuse, and then reinforce this coercive control in countless ways. As a result, many women see themselves without any recourse or resources and then, finally, try to equalize the violence against them or defend themselves and/or their children by resorting to use of force. Their abusive male partner's use of violence, however, may or may not be one of many components of control that he uses against her. Straus's characterizations of women's violence and the dyad types he proposes neglect these fundamental issues. In short, gender and context are essential to any analysis that will lead to reducing and finally eradicating violence against women.

Lisa Young Larance  
RENEW Program Coordinator  
Catholic Social Services of  
Washtenaw County  
Ann Arbor, Michigan USA

## References

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