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RESEARCH / *A study of sexual and physical abuse of women has met with resistance from people who seem determined not to believe how widespread the problem is. They should consider the careful, scientifically valid way the study was conducted*

The extent of sexual violence in women's lives

BY LORI HASKELL and MELANIE RANDALL

SINCE the July 29 release of the final report of the Canadian Panel on Violence Against Women, much attention has been focused on the subject, with some indignation and disbelief expressed about the prevalence rates of sexual violence published in the report.

These statistical findings come from an independent study the two of us directed, identified in the panel's report as the Women's Safety Project. The process and content of the panel's work aside, we want to address some of the misapprehensions about our research findings and to explain how the study was carried out.

Our study confirms that the presence of sexual and physical abuse in women's lives is disturbingly high – shocking, perhaps, for those not aware of the decades of research and scholarship that informed our study. Over half of the 420 female respondents in our survey (51 per cent) reported experiencing a rape or attempted rape, more than one-quarter (27 per cent) reported physical assault in a relationship with a male partner, and more than one-third (43 per cent) reported a sexual-abuse experience in childhood.

Given these high rates of violence, there have been some predictable doubts expressed about the validity and credibility of the research itself, by those who seem determined to disprove just how extensive the problem really is. While informed questions about the methods and applicability of research studies are welcome as part of respectful public discussion of social issues, critiques which are nothing more than uninformed diatribes are not.

In terms of the politics of violence against women, of greater significance is the explicit denial and minimizing that pervades such opinions and commentaries. For example, in a recent conversation, a male editor at a leading newspaper challenged the research findings simply on the basis that he found them to be "counter-intuitive" to men. Asked to elaborate, he explained that he and most of the men in his circles simply didn't know any women who had been raped or physically assaulted. The irony of challenging scientifically valid research on the basis of something as flimsy as "men's intuition" apparently escaped him.

In professional evaluations of research methodologies by leading North American experts, the approach taken in our study has been recognized for a number of strengths: the random sample, the in-depth training of the interviewers, the face-to-face interviews, the confidentiality and anonymity of respondents, and the design of the questionnaire. In addition to pre-testing, the questionnaire itself was subjected to professional scrutiny, including evaluation by some of the leading North American experts on sexual abuse, such as social psychologist Diana Russell, recently retired from Mills College in Berkeley; clinical psychologist Jon Briere of the University of Southern California School of Medicine; psychiatrist Judith Herman of Harvard Medical School, and San Francisco educator Sandra Butler.

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Our survey's results were generated from a randomly-selected group of female respondents, from various age groups, income levels and ethnic backgrounds. The sample, designed by the The Institute for Social Research at York University, consisted of a list of addresses randomly selected by computer from a list of all the addresses in the City of Toronto. This distinguishes our study from the vast majority of other research on the topic, which is based on non-random samples of specifically selected populations of women, such as women using shelters or reporting to the police. Statistics from that type of research cannot be generalized to the larger population because of the biased sampling methods.

Since respondents in our survey were randomly selected, and nothing was known about any of the women in advance of their participation, the results of our study can be applied beyond the 420 women interviewed. They suggest something about the extent of violence in women's lives more generally.

What's more, only 19 per cent of the eligible women contacted by an interviewer in our survey declined the interview. In another 5 per cent of the households where an interviewer made contact, another household member, including husbands, said that no one at that address was interested in the study.

Of note, and contrary to the assumption that women who agreed to be interviewed were those who had experiences of abuse that they wanted to talk about, some of the women who declined to participate indicated that it was precisely because they were dealing with painful memories or current abuse experiences that they did not feel able to discuss them.

THE interviewers for our study were highly skilled women who underwent at least 60 hours of rigorous training on survey-research methods, the structure and administration of the questionnaire, and sensitization to the issues involved in interviewing women on this painful and stigmatized subject. Women interviewed for the survey were asked standardized questions. The length of the interviews varied according to whether a woman reported any abuse experiences and the number of those experiences she disclosed. The average length of the interviews was two hours but in some of the more extreme cases, where women's lives had been ravaged by repeated experiences of childhood sexual abuse and further violence from male partners later in life, they required more time.

One of the methodological features that accounts for the high rates of disclosure in our study is that women were not simply asked whether they had been raped; the questions defined what constitutes a rape. For example, to ascertain rates of sexual assault at the level of rape and attempted rape, women were asked whether they had experienced forced or attempted forced sexual intercourse against their will. This is a definition of sexual assault far more stringent than that currently recognized in Canadian law.

Many of the women indicated they had never disclosed their experiences of abuse prior to the interview, except in some cases

(*continued overleaf*)

to a close friend at the time of the event. This is testimony to the silencing and denial that still surrounds sexual violence and to the stigmatizing of women who disclose experiencing it. Indeed, it is the supposed intimacy and safety of the relationships in which the vast majority of this abuse of women takes place – perpetrated by fathers, brothers, uncles, boy-friends and husbands – that provides the greatest resistance to acknowledging it.

The prevalence rates from our research indicate the devastating "normalcy" and frequency of violence and abuse in the life experiences of a diverse sample of urban Canadian women. They challenge the myth that it is only a small or distinct group of women who have known the violation and terror of a sexual or physical assault.

Our study contributes to several decades of researchers' and community activists' work to raise public awareness of the dimensions of sexual violence in women's lives. It is imperative that we focus our collective energies on developing social, educational and economic strategies to prevent and eradicate it.

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The article EM9332 reprinted overleaf and above is used in Chapter 3 of the STAT 231 Course Materials and in Figure 2.2b of the STAT 332 Course Materials.

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