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Self-Defense and Female-Perpetrated Violence



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her partner's violence, as retaliation for prolonged abuse, or because the woman does not see an alternative method to escape the abusive relationship (Buss 2006; Daly and Wilson 1988). Women are less likely than men to inflict physical aggression against a partner in retribution for that partner's infidelity (Wilson and Daly 1985).

Synonyms

[Intimate partner violence](#); [Male sexual jealousy](#);
[Physical aggression](#); [Retaliation](#); [Self-defense](#)

Definition

Whereas men use physical aggression against women to control women's sexual behavior, women typically use physical aggression against men to defend themselves from male attacks or to retaliate for long-term abuse.

Introduction

In many samples, men and women inflict physical aggression against one another with relatively equal frequency (Archer 2000). However, Archer (2000) reports that female-perpetrated violence against men is primarily nonlethal, whereas men's aggression against women is more likely to be lethal. A woman uses physical aggression against a man in self-defense and in response to

Motivation for Violence

Women experience and respond to fear differently than men (Cross and Campbell 2011). Although fear sometimes motivates competitiveness and combativeness in men, women's fear more often inhibits aggression. Women respond to danger or threats more sensitively and carefully than men, although both sexes may have evolved psychological anti-homicide mechanisms to avoid physical injury and death (Buss 2006). Women are less prone to engage in physical violence, perhaps because the majority of child-rearing responsibilities fall to women, who therefore may have more to lose as a consequence of debilitating physical injury (Campbell 2013). Engaging in violent behavior and subsequently dying might be especially devastating for the survival prospects of a woman's offspring. Additionally, avoiding physical violence would be advantageous for women because fertilization and gestation occurs within women. Safeguarding the ability to successfully rear offspring may have been particularly important for women's ancestral reproductive success.

Given strong selection pressures for women to avoid physical injury, female-perpetrated violence primarily occurs in situations in which women must protect themselves from extreme bodily harm or death.

Self-Defense

Female-perpetrated violence is often initiated in response to a male intimate partner's aggression against the woman. *Male* sexual jealousy is the primary reason women defend themselves from or kill their mates (Daly and Wilson 1988). Male sexual jealousy motivates men to use aggression against women to manipulate female sexual behavior (e.g., to dissuade the woman from committing infidelity or abandoning the relationship; Buss 2000; Smuts 1992). In response to physical aggression and the threat of homicide motivated by male sexual jealousy, women use violence to protect themselves, their current offspring, and their future reproductive opportunities. In fact, women's aggression is greater against intimate partners than against other targets and is typically associated with a disinhibiting situation that evokes aggression (Cross and Campbell 2011), such as contexts in which the woman is defending herself from a violent intimate partner. Additionally, Cross and Campbell (2011) reported that female-perpetrated aggression against men peaks between the woman's ages 15–19 years. Women within this age range have maximum reproductive value or expected future reproduction. Given the importance men place on fertility and youth in a long-term partner, men are more likely to respond violently to a younger (and therefore more reproductively valuable) partner's desertion or infidelity (Buss 2006; Daly and Wilson 1988). Thus, younger women are more likely to use violence to defend themselves against sexually jealous male partners.

Retaliation

Outside the context of defense from a partner's violent attacks, it may have been ancestrally beneficial for a woman to kill or to use violence against her partner. A woman who kills her partner after experiencing his violence over an extended period may eventually kill him to permanently end the abuse or to protect her children. For

example, Daly and Wilson (1988) report that wives kill their husbands after prolonged and severe intimate partner abuse, when they reside closer to their genetic relatives, and when their children are threatened or abused. Women retaliate when they are not able to identify an alternate strategy to escape their abusive partner. Unlike men, who often use partner-directed violence to coerce and control a partner, women use partner-directed violence (including homicide) to escape a dangerous partner or to seek retribution for previous and ongoing physical violence against them or their children.

Additionally, in rare instances, women kill their partner for suspected or actual infidelity. Although jealousy-motivated partner-killing is more often committed by men against women, some women cite jealousy as the primary motivator for killing their partner (Daly and Wilson 1988). For example, of all homicides in Detroit in 1982, 58 were related to marital conflicts and 20 of these were completed by women (Wilson and Daly 1985). Of these 20 homicides, six women killed their husband because of his infidelity. Women may be less likely than men to kill their partners in response to a real or suspected infidelity because women cannot be duped into investing in a genetically unrelated offspring – that is, a partner's infidelity may be less reproductively costly for women than for men. However, partner-killing may be beneficial for women in cases in which killing the husband would halt allocation of his resources to a female rival and her offspring.

Conclusion

Women perform most child-rearing duties and invest more heavily in offspring than do men. Thus, women may have more to lose by engaging in or experiencing physical violence. Although women benefit less by perpetrating violence than do men, women use aggression strategically to physically defend themselves from jealous mates, to escape abusive relationships, to retaliate for prolonged abuse, to protect offspring, and, occasionally, to punish or prevent a partner's infidelity.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Benefits of Aggression](#)
- ▶ [Contexts for Women's Aggression Against Men](#)
- ▶ [Female-Perpetrated Violence](#)

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