

Multi-Perpetrator Domestic Violence

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Abstract

A significant proportion of reports of domestic violence against women involve multiple perpetrators. Although the number of perpetrators has been consistently identified as a measure of abuse severity, only a minority of studies of domestic violence examine the role of multiple offenders. Data on multi-perpetrator domestic violence (MDV) is frequently removed from analysis in domestic violence studies, or multi-perpetrator incidents are treated as single-perpetrator incidents. However, the available research links MDV to negative mental and physical health outcomes, intimate partner homicide, homelessness among women, and severe mental illness and suicidality. This article reviews the available prevalence data on MDV and draws together research on the contexts in which MDV takes place. It highlights two groups that are particularly vulnerable to MDV: (1) girls and women partnered to members of gangs and organized crime groups and (2) girls and women in some ethnic minority communities. While discussions of honor in relation to domestic violence are often racialized in Western media, this article highlights the cross-cultural role of masculine honor in collective violence against women in the working class and impoverished communities of majority cultures as well as in migrant and ethnic minority communities. It is clear that such complex forms of violence present a range of challenges for intervention and treatment and the article emphasizes the need for specialized and coordinated modes of investigation, support, and care.

Keywords

domestic violence and cultural contexts, domestic violence, cultural contexts, community violence, stalking, sexual assault

Introduction

In the research literature, the paradigmatic incident of violence against women and/or their children typically involves one perpetrator and one victim. While it is recognized that the relational quality of violence has impacts beyond the perpetrator/victim dyad, such as when a child witnesses domestic violence (Edleson, 1999), a key criticism has been that research studies have “yet to address basic differences in victimization experiences” (Matlow & DePrince, 2012, p. 1). There is considerable heterogeneity in the violence experienced by women and this has important consequences for their responses and outcomes (Nurius & Macy, 2008). The number of perpetrators involved in an incident of physical or sexual violence against women and/or children has been consistently identified as a measure of abuse severity (Crane, 2006; Ford, Stockton, Kaltman, & Green, 2006; Leserman et al., 1997). Measurements of multi-perpetrator victimization do not always disaggregate data in ways that differentiate between incidents involving multiple perpetrators and revictimization by solo perpetrators or some combination of the two. Nonetheless, research shows that a significant proportion of incidents of violence against women and children involve multiple perpetrators, and this abuse may be premeditated and coordinated.

Between 1 in 10 and 1 in 3 rape victims report the presence of multiple perpetrators during an incident of sexual assault (Horvath & Kelly, 2009). Clinic-based studies of women and

children receiving treatment for sexual abuse find that up to one in five report organized sexual abuse by multiple perpetrators (Salter & Richters, 2012). Female stalking victims commonly report that more than one person was involved in their harassment, including the friends or family of an ex-partner (Sheridan, Davies, & Boon, 2001). Survey findings suggest that 1 in 10 physical assaults on women, and almost 1 in 5 aggravated assaults, involve multiple perpetrators (Bachman & Saltzman, 1995). In approximately half of cases, women knew at least one of the abusers.

These women include victims of what this article calls “multi-perpetrator domestic violence” (MDV), in which a person’s intimate partner draws other people into participating in their physical and/or sexual victimization. This may include incidents of violence involving multiple perpetrators and/or recurrent incidents of violence involving different perpetrators (connected to the intimate partner through gang affiliation or family/community/peer linkages) as well as the involvement

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of multiple perpetrators in patterns of stalking and coercive control. Although multi-perpetrator sexual violence against women has been the subject of sustained study (Chambers, Horvath, & Kelly, 2010; Sanday, 2007; Woodhams, Cooke, Harkins, & Silva, 2012), relatively little is known about the circumstances and dynamics of MDV. Studies of physical violence against women and girls often fail to ask questions germane to multi-perpetrator victimization although for over a decade the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention has recommended that domestic violence incident data instruments measure the number of perpetrators (Saltzman, Fanslow, McMahon, & Shelley, 2002) and researchers have argued that domestic violence screening should incorporate questions about multiple perpetrators (Little & Kaufman Kantor, 2002; Renker, 2002). As will be discussed, studies of domestic violence incidence data find more perpetrators than incidents (e.g., Vazquez, Stohr, & Purkiss, 2005) but even where relevant research data are gathered, multiple perpetrator cases are frequently excluded from analysis or analyzed as though they were a single perpetrator incident.

The absence of information on MDV is concerning in light of the evidence that multiple perpetrators and multiple incidents of interpersonal violence are associated with negative mental and physical health outcomes for women in comparison to solo offences (Davis, Combs-Lane, & Jackson, 2002; Ford, et al., 2006; Ullman, 2007). The available literature suggests that MDV has other serious consequences. Case reviews of spousal homicide in North America have found that a significant minority of incidents involved multiple perpetrators (Block & Christakos, 1995; Mercy & Saltzman, 1989) and MDV is recognized as a major cause of homelessness among women (Cooper, 2004). Where the experiences of workers with clients facing multi-perpetrator violence and harassment have been documented, it is clear that such complex forms of violence present a range of challenges for intervention and treatment (Cooper, 2004; Firmin, 2010, 2011). However, there is at present limited information available to guide policy or practice in relation to domestic violence cases involving multiple perpetrators.

This article will begin by reviewing the available prevalence data on MDV drawn from case review studies of victim reports to domestic violence services, the police, and other agencies. It will then consider the available literature on multi-perpetrator physical violence against girls and women and discuss the two groups that research suggests are particularly vulnerable to MDV: (1) girls and women partnered to members of gangs and organized crime groups (Brown, 2007; Cooper, Anaf, & Bowden, 2008; Firmin, 2011) and (2) girls and women in particular ethnic minority communities (Dasgupta, 2007; Gill, 2008; Latif, 2011). This article will discuss the similarities as well as the differences between these two contexts of MDV. In particular, the article will emphasize the ways in which cultural linkages between masculine honor and female subordination can be strengthened by social and economic marginalization, prompting some boys and men to turn to collective acts of criminality and violence in an effort to defend their sense of

masculine prestige. Discussions of male honor in relation to domestic violence are often racialized in Western media and associated with ethnic minority communities (Maher, Segrave, Pickering, & McCulloch, 2005), but this article highlights the cross-cultural role of honor in collective violence against women in the working class and impoverished communities of majority cultures as well as in migrant and ethnic minority communities. This article will close by reflecting on the challenges that MDV poses for workers in a range of contexts.

Method

Research on domestic violence only infrequently reports data on the number of perpetrators and so in order to capture the available information it was necessary to search a range of databases in the social sciences, psychology, and medicine. The terms “domestic violence,” “intimate partner violence,” “spouse abuse,” and “family violence” were combined with the terms “multiple offenders,” “multiple perpetrators,” and “multi-perpetrator” in order to identify peer-reviewed publications with data on the prevalence and contexts of MDV. The search terms were also inputted into Google Scholar to uncover “gray literature” in the form of relevant research projects and reports released by government agencies and university research centers. The majority of references to multiple offenders/perpetrators in the literature on violence against women and children are in relation to child sexual abuse since there is evidence of crossover between domestic violence and multi-perpetrator child sexual abuse (see Salter, 2013). Those sources that did not address MDV specifically were excluded from the study.

A significant proportion of references to multiple perpetrators/offenders in the domestic violence literature addressed the unreliability of available research instruments to collect information on multi-perpetrator incidents (e.g., Edleson, Shin, & Johnson Armendariz, 2008; Grossman & Lundy, 2011; Paulozzi, Saltzman, Thompson, & Holmgreen, 2001) and the resultant exclusion of multi-perpetrator incidents from the analysis (Bachman, 2000; Puzone, Saltzman, Kresnow, Thompson, & Mercy, 2000) or the coding of reports of multi-perpetrator abuse as solo-perpetrator incidents (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2000; Griffing et al., 2006). These studies underscore the uncertain status of MDV in current research on violence against women. Where such studies reported on MDV prevalence or trends, they were included in the review.

Four peer-reviewed articles provided data on the prevalence of MDV as defined in this study (Grossman & Lundy, 2011; Martin et al., 1999; Saltzman et al., 1990; Thompson, Saltzman, & Bibel, 1999), as did one government-funded research report (Cooper, 2004). A range of journal articles, book chapters, and research reports provided information on the contexts on which MDV takes place. Government-funded reports by Cooper (2004) and Firmin (2010, 2011) have been particularly important in this respect. The literature consistently identified MDV in gangs as well as in some ethnic minority communities, which led to more targeted research in relation to violence

against women in these contexts. After identifying studies related to MDV, the bibliographies of articles and reports were examined in order to identify other relevant publications. This material has been supplemented by further research into domestic violence in gangs and ethnic minority communities.

This review addresses an emerging area of concern in the domestic violence literature, but data collection on multiple perpetrators has been inconsistent and erratic, and there is no standardized vocabulary for multi-perpetrator experiences of domestic violence. Data pointing to more complex patterns of multi-perpetrator victimization have been understood, interpreted, and presented in a variety of ways. As a result, the available data point to provocative and interesting associations that need to be explored through further research. The evidence base for MDV is therefore still in the process of consolidation and this review aims to facilitate that process. As a result, the findings of this review are not definitive but rather they point to important areas for future research and discussion.

Critical Points of Research Review

A significant minority of women reporting domestic violence to the police or domestic violence services require protection from multiple perpetrators (MDV).

- Girls and women partnered to members of gangs/organized crime groups are at heightened risk of MDV.
- In some ethnic minority communities, extended kin networks, friends, and associates may collude in the collective victimization of a woman or girl.
- MDV emerges from conditions of social and economic marginalization in which collective violence against girls and women serves as a means of establishing and protecting masculine honor and status.
- MDV can include torturous or even homicidal levels of violence, and survivors have a range of mental, physical, and psychosocial problems.

Prevalence and Characteristics of MDV

At present, there are no available data on the community prevalence of MDV because large-scale surveys on violence against women and girls have not asked question pertaining to multi-perpetrator violence and harassment. Available data gathered by domestic violence services, police forces, and other agencies find significant variation (between 0.35% and 16%) in reports of MDV among girls and women reporting domestic violence (Cooper, 2004; Grossman & Lundy, 2011; Martin, et al., 1999; Saltzman, et al., 1990; Thompson et al., 1999).¹ In Thompson, Saltzman, and Bibel's (1999) sample of 9,745 reports of women victimized by an intimate partner or ex-partner recorded by the National Incident-Based Reporting System from 1994 to 1996, 34 (0.35%) of cases involved multiple perpetrators. A study of over 240,000 women and girls who made contact with a domestic violence service in Illinois found that 2.4% of women reported multiple perpetrators

(Grossman & Lundy, 2011). Five percent of a consecutive sample of 774 prenatal patients in North Carolina reported non-sexual physical violence by multiple perpetrators and 15% reported multi-perpetrator sexual violence (Martin, et al., 1999). Saltzman et al. (1990) examined a stratified sample of 150 police incident reports in Georgia of nonfatal family and intimate assault and identified that 5% involved multiple offenders. A 12-month case review of a domestic violence service in Adelaide, Australia, found that 16% ($n = 27$) of women were seeking protection from multiple perpetrators (Cooper, 2004).

Only one study has examined variables that are related to MDV. In Thompson et al.'s (1999) analysis of 34 incidents of multi-perpetrator victimization, the researchers reported that these offences were more likely to include sexual assault and rape, more likely to be perpetrated by an ex-partner rather than current partner, and that both the victim and the perpetrator were more likely to be young in comparison to other incidents under study. This is commensurate with other research that has found that the odds of MDV decrease with the age of the perpetrator (Idaho State Police, 2003).

Female-to-male perpetrated domestic violence is considerably less injurious in comparison to male-to-female perpetrated domestic violence (Caldwell, Swan, & Woodbroan, 2012) and hence is less likely to come to the attention of the police and health or welfare agencies (Melton & Sillito, 2012). Nonetheless, it is interesting to note that incident data suggest that women recorded as domestic violence perpetrators are more likely than men to commit the offence with others. A study of 36,693 incidents of domestic violence recorded in the National Incident Based Reporting System by Idaho Law Enforcement found that, between 1995 and 2001, 17.7% of incidents were related to multiple perpetrators (Idaho State Police, 2003). In this study, 75.1% of identified perpetrators were male and, of these men, 16.4% committed the offence with additional perpetrators; 24.7% of offenders were identified as female and 85.6% of these committed the offence with others, such as "friends, acquaintances, siblings or others known" (p. 9). It is well recognized that women charged for domestic violence offences commonly have a history of victimization by their partner and much of their violence can be understood as retaliatory and/or defensive (Allen, 2011; Johnson, 2006; Saunders, 2002). A logical explanation for female-initiated MDV against men is that the woman's friends, family, or others have also engaged in defensive or retaliatory violence, although more research is needed in this area. As will be discussed, the apparent overrepresentation of women in MDV incidents may also be related to the participation of female relatives (such as mothers-in-law) in MDV against women in some ethnic minority communities. The circumstances of MDV committed against girls and women are unclear, and this article will review in more detail what is currently known about MDV perpetrated by male partners against female partners.

MDV in Gangs and Organized Criminal Groups

Girls and women typically become involved in gang activity through ex-partners or current partners, family members, or

through a need to obtain drugs (Cooper, 2004; Firmin, 2011). Women partnered to men in gangs appear to be overrepresented in domestic violence services (Cooper, 2004) and gang involvement is a well-known risk factor for male perpetration and female victimization through physical and sexual violence (Miller et al., 2012; Reed, Silverman, Raj, Decker, & Miller, 2011). Prevalence data on domestic violence in organized crime groups and gangs are not currently available, and the violence that gang members commit against their partners and children is routinely ignored by those agencies tasked to respond to organized crime (Cooper, et al., 2008). However, it is well recognized that rates of domestic violence are higher in gangs than in the community, and this violence can include multi-perpetrator victimization by gang members (Brown, 2007; Cooper, et al., 2008; Firmin, 2011).

MDV has been noted in street gangs as well as drug trafficking networks and outlaw motorcycle gangs (Cooper, 2004; Firmin, 2011). Gang culture is typically misogynist and can incorporate normalized multiple-perpetrator violence such as rituals of gang rape as a form of initiation, formalizing patterns of male perpetration and female victimization (Hanna, 1999; Hunt & Joe-Laidler, 2001; Miller & Decker, 2001). The notion that women are the “properties” not only of their partner but also of his gang associates can lead to multi-perpetrator physical and sexual violence, stalking, and harassment (Firmin, 2011). A desire to maintain power and control over a partner or ex-partner is common among domestic violence perpetrators, but in the case of gang members this is reinforced by concern that the woman may reveal secret information about criminal activity to the authorities (Brown, 2007). In Baltimore, it has been reported that some victims of gang-related domestic violence were “branded” with a red-hot implement by their partners to establish that they “belonged” to him and the gang (Brown, 2007).

In her professional experience as a judge, Brown (2007, p. 396) has found that girls and women partnered to gang members “report that they are reluctant or refuse to testify in a domestic violence case because they fear retaliation not only from the defendant, a gang member, but also from his fellow gang members.” Such intimidation includes threats and acts of violence, property damage, and courtroom intimidation carried out by the defendant, their family, gang members, and friends or associates (Murphy Healey, 1995). One young woman interviewed by Miller and colleagues (2012, p. 80) in their study of gang-affiliated Latina women stated that she was frightened to leave her home when her partner is out because of his gang “friends,” stating “I know they’re watching.” Other reasons why women experiencing gang-related MDV may be reluctant to report their abuse includes their own culpability in the crimes committed by the partner (e.g., by holding drugs or driving vehicles when a crime is being committed) and/or the woman may have been subject to sexual violence by group members, leading to feelings of shame and humiliation as well as traumatic mental health problems that inhibit disclosure (Brown, 2007; Cooper, 2004; Firmin, 2011). In this context, sexual violence and coercion has been identified as a “weapon” through which girls and women are punished, silenced, and controlled (Firmin, 2010).

In the absence of specialized police support, women and children victims must contend with criminal networks with the capacity to infiltrate police and government services (Cooper et al., 2008). Unsurprisingly, victims of MDV evince considerable skepticism about the capacity of the authorities to protect them or their family members from gang retaliation (Firmin, 2011, p. 36). In the Australian context, clients escaping from abusive groups reported “physical violence, coercion, intimidation and intimate sexual violence in the form of systematic rape from multiple men in a short space of time” (Cooper, 2004, p. 1). Similar reports have been documented among girls and women in Britain with gang-involved partners or male relatives (Firmin, 2010, 2011). These women described their fear of “kidnap, torture, sexual violence, threat to life, threats to the home [and] isolation” (Firmin, 2011, p. 36).

Multi-perpetrator violence can form the key criminal locus of some abusive groups which Cooper (2004) described as “cults” due to the centrality of that sadistic and ritualistic violence plays in the life of group members. In such environments, “[s]ocial isolation, provocation of fear and induction of guilt, alternating kindness with threats to create disequilibrium, dependency and learned helplessness” are used to establish a high degree of control over victimized women and children (Cooper, 2004, p. 6). Some women escaping from these cults:

describe experiencing not just a violent individual or family relationship, but often abuses that are ritualistic, violent in the extreme and that involve a known or sometimes amorphous chain of persons who can track, stalk and report on the women’s movements. (Cooper, 2004, p. 4)

MDV overlaps significantly with research on organized abuse in abusive groups and families, which has documented multi-perpetrator patterns of physical and sexual violence against children and women (Cooper, 2004; Salter, 2013; Sarsion & MacDonald, 2008). DeKeseredy, Schwartz, Fagen, and Hall (2006) have described the ways in which serious domestic violence perpetrators draw on the support of abusive relatives and peers to legitimize their violence, to the point of engaging in collective physical and sexual assaults. This highlights the ways in which violence against women can form the locus of organized criminality although the policing of “organized crime” rarely addresses the gendered violence of abusive groups (Cooper et al., 2008).

MDV in Ethnic Minority Communities

Research into variations in domestic violence patterns has found significant differences in domestic violence prevalence and characteristics between nations, cultures, and ethnic groups. An international epidemiological study by the World Health Organization on violence against women found the highest rates of domestic violence in areas of Africa and South Asia (Garcia-Moreno, Jansen, Ellsberg, Heise, & Watts, 2006). Studies in South Asia and other low-income countries find that women reporting spousal abuse also report high rates of sexual

violence by an intimate partner compared to victimized women in other countries (Decker et al., 2008; Kapadia, Saleem, & Karim, 2010; Martin, Tsui, Maitra, & Marinshaw, 1999). Intimate partner violence against women in these communities can involve multiple perpetrators, such as parents and siblings, who may assume authority for the discipline and control of the wife of a son or brother.

Fernandez's (1997) review of 15 cases of domestic violence by extended family members in India emphasizes the subordination of young daughters-in-law to older women as well as men in her husband's family. Research with Israeli Arab women has also found reports of physical abuse perpetrated by members of their husband's extended family (Savaya & Cohen, 1998). In Australia, violence against women and children in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities is widely known as "family violence" (rather than domestic/intimate partner violence) in recognition of the centrality of extended kinship networks in indigenous social life. It is well recognized that perpetrators of family violence may act as a group and may victimize groups rather than individuals (Memmott, Stacy, Chambers, & Keys, 2001).

Research findings on the nature and prevalence of domestic and family violence among ethnic minority and migrant women are mixed and ambiguous. A recent review by Ghafournia (2011) found some studies identifying elevated rates of domestic violence experienced by non-English-speaking women in comparison to other women, and some studies identifying similar or lower rates. While it is uncertain whether ethnic minority and immigrant women experience elevated levels of violence (and any such relationship is likely to be mediated by socioeconomic and other factors, see Grossman & Lundy, 2007), domestic violence is known to be particularly challenging for immigrant, refugee, and ethnic minority women for a range of reasons. Ethnic minority and migrant girls and women face a range of obstacles when seeking to escape from domestic violence, including language and cultural barriers, a lack of knowledge of services and complications relating to their migration or visa status (Easteal, 1996; Menjivar & Salcido, 2002). Services and the police may hold discriminatory views about ethnic minorities and immigrants that trivialize or ignore their experiences of domestic violence, while ethnic and migrant communities may resist acknowledging violence in their community for fear of stigmatization (Menjivar & Salcido, 2002). Immigrant and ethnic minority women may also hold views about domestic violence that inhibit them from accessing services or disclosing their experiences of violence (Abu-Ras, 2007). However, other challenges are present in relation to domestic violence in some cultural and ethnic communities, particularly the involvement of family members and associates in reprisals against girls and women deemed to breach social norms and values (Siddiqui, 2005).

The role of multiple perpetrators in domestic violence against migrant and refugee women has challenged traditional Western understandings of and responses to domestic violence (Warrier & Rose, 2009). Dabby and Poore (2007) have identified the frequency with which victims of domestic violence

with Asian or Pacific Islander background report multiple batterers, including perpetrators from their husband's family as well as their own. Dasgupta (2007, p. 4) notes:

Historically in South Asia, older women in the extended family were responsible for socializing new brides in the family's ethos and behaviours and doling out punishment to recalcitrant and transgressing women. While the powerful males set the codes of conduct, their day-to-day implementation was left to the family's older women . . . This pattern has not quite disappeared in the immigrant milieu. As extended families continue to reconfigure in North America, the proverbial "mother-in-law" abuse has started to raise its ugly head. In addition, many battered women have reported to CBOs that other members of the affinal family, such as mothers- and fathers-in-law, sisters- and brothers-in-law, also inflict violence on them.

Reports of violence against women and children in ethnic communities with strong Muslim affiliation have become politicized within the Islamophobic discourses that have flourished under the "war on terror" (Ho, 2007). Discussions of "honor-based violence" and "honor killings" have often included descriptions of MDV; however, this has resulted at times in a simplistic conflation of multi-perpetrator violence against women with Islam. For example, Chesler (2009, 2010) associates fundamentalist Islam with patterns of coercive control and violence that amount to "domestic terrorism," encompassing multi-perpetrator violence, stalking and, in the most extreme cases, homicide. Such analyses present a monolithic view of Muslim communities that do not recognize important national and cultural distinctions or the heterogeneity of views on violence against women within cultural communities. It could be argued that the connections drawn between Islam and multi-perpetrator violence against women ignore more fundamental associations between notions of masculine honor, aggression, and the domination of women; notions that transcend ethnic or cultural boundaries. This raises important questions about the linkages between masculine status and gendered violence that have often been overlooked in the controversies over "honor-based violence" (Latif, 2011).

Maher, Segrave, Pickering, and McCulloch (2005) suggest that notions of masculine honor are deeply entrenched in Western cultures and have an important role to play in violence against women in "White" as well as ethnic minority communities. This subject is discussed at more length in the following section. Nonetheless, honor can become linked to MDV in ethnic minority communities where the behavior of girls and women is seen to impact on the status of kin groups and networks as a whole (Gill, 2008). In such contexts, girls and women can be exposed to the scrutiny, discipline, and potentially the violence of multiple people in her family and community (Brandon & Hafez, 2008). A key dimension of this form of MDV is that it may involve the premeditation and collusion of multiple people who seek to evade detection by the authorities. In the United Kingdom, the Crown Prosecution Service (2010) has published legal guidance regarding the prosecution of what

they call “honor-based violence and forced marriage.” This guidance notes that:

It is evident from recent prosecutions that many of these crimes are extremely well organised, planned by more than one individual and may have been instigated by others. There is clear evidence, from cases throughout the UK, that crimes are premeditated with multiple offenders being involved, which include family, extended family and community members in the UK and overseas.

Much like women facing gang-related MDV, women from ethnic minority backgrounds are at particular risk of elevated and even homicidal levels of violence when they seek to bring an abusive relationship to an end. In the context of the South Asian diaspora in the United Kingdom, Latif (2011) describes the ways in which a woman who leaves a violent husband may be labeled as “dishonorable” and therefore deserving of victimization and even death by the perpetrator, relatives, or other men in the community. Traditions of male solidarity and female subordination can provide domestic violence perpetrators with enhanced opportunities to track partners and ex-partners using family members and friends (Payton, 2011).

MDV and Masculine Honor

In research on violence, the term “honor” has been used to refer to the status and reputation of a person and/or group which is based on, and enables, their ability to obtain advantage, recognition, and deferential treatment from others (Nisbett & Cohen, 1996). The literature on male-to-male violence suggests that a tendency to respond violently to slights against masculine honor is a common cause of male victimization in Western countries (Polk, 1994, 1999; Tomsen, 1997). In the literature on violence against women, however, the term honor is typically used more narrowly to refer to gendered violence in so-called cultures of honor in developing countries, particularly the Middle East, and their diaspora (Brandon & Hafez, 2008; Kulczycki & Windle, 2011; Welchman & Hossain, 2005). The racialized use of honor in relation to violence against women is contested by criminologists who have documented the Western attitude, entrenched in the traditions of criminal law, that reasonable men may be “provoked” to batter or kill women (or other groups such as gay men) when they feel their masculine honor has been besmirched or insulted (Maher, et al., 2005; Tomsen, 2009; Tyson, 2013).

The linkage between masculinity, honor, and violence appears to be strengthened in socioeconomic contexts characterized by poverty and disadvantage. It has been suggested that, in the face of structural powerlessness or discrimination, boys and men may draw on crime and violence in an effort to “accomplish masculinity” where more legitimate methods are unavailable (Messerschmidt, 1993). While the impact of disadvantage on the relation between violence and masculinity is complex and shifting (Gadd, 2002), it has been documented in research on domestic violence (Salter, 2012), gang formation

(Bourgois, 1996), and crime and violence in ethnic and migrant communities (Meetoo & Safia Mirza, 2007). This recenters the relation between masculine honor and violence within a broader discussion of the interpersonal and social impacts of poverty and other kinds of strain (including migration and the social disorganization experienced by disadvantaged communities, see Decker, Gemert, & Pyrooz, 2009) as an alternative to the cultural reductionist position that construes “honor-based violence” as a characteristic of particular “cultures.”

The social organization of some families, communities, and peer groups would appear to promote MDV where legitimate opportunities have been foreclosed by disadvantage and masculine honor is associated with the capacity to control and dominate girls and women. In such a context, “respect” may be earned or protected through the group policing of female behavior. This is true in gang culture, where girls and women may be sanctioned with severe violence for breaching expected feminine norms and behaviors (Ulloa, Dyson, & Wynes, 2012), as well as in families and communities with strong religious and social prescriptions against female insubordination (Gill, 2011). The research of DeKeseredy and colleagues (2006) on peer support for domestic violence suggests that multiple perpetrators can be drawn into domestic violence in an ad hoc way through shared misogynist and pro-violence attitudes. In all these circumstances, the violent control of girls and women appears to serve as a means of establishing and displaying masculine identity and status and this violence can draw in multiple perpetrators when staged in front of peers and/or where others are motivated to ensure male control of girls and women.

The Challenges of Responding to MDV

Policies that aim to reduce violence against women rarely acknowledge complexities of the kind faced by girls and women experiencing MDV, including the strategic use of sexual violence to silence victims and the complexities of attachment to abusive families and groups (Cooper, 2004; Firmin, 2010, 2011). Such challenges are acknowledged and addressed in women’s services such as rape crisis centers and domestic violence centers; however, these services are typically underfunded and can struggle to accommodate the needs of very complex clients (Cooper, 2004; Firmin, 2010, 2011). Frontline workers in contact with women with serious histories of abuse and trauma have repeatedly identified the ways in which services for this population are rationed to the point where their mental and physical health needs, and their revictimization risk, characteristically go unaddressed (Breckenridge, Salter, & Shaw, 2012). This speaks to a broader set of questions regarding the lack of gender equity in health and welfare systems where women’s needs in relation to abuse and trauma are often overlooked (Garcia-Moreno, 2006) while girls and women in migrant and ethnic communities face additional burdens specific to their immigration or cultural status (Kasturirangan, Krishnan, & Riger, 2004).

Those agencies tasked to respond to gang-related violence and organized crime routinely ignore the women and girls affected by this violence (Cooper et al., 2008), which mirrors the experience of ethnic minority and immigrant women seeking protection from multiple perpetrator abuse (CPS, 2010). Ethnic minority and immigrant women fleeing MDV have been branded “melodramatic and manipulative” by the police when they attempted to report their abuse (Payton, 2011, p. 71–72) and their stories of multi-perpetrator physical and sexual abuse have been considered “beyond belief” by the courts (Siddiqui, 2005, p. 267). Such conduct is in contrast to “best practice” models that recommend a well-coordinated, multi-agency investigation that requires a considerable injection of resources (Cooper, 2004; Firmin 2010, 2011). In Britain, the Crown Prosecution Service (2010) suggests that

The conspiratorial nature of such crimes requires consideration of whether it is necessary and justified to utilise the tools that are most effective against organised crime e.g. covert intelligence techniques.

New models of domestic violence case management, such as the “Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference” (MARAC), may offer a promising model of intervention in such circumstances (CordisBright Consulting, 2011; Robinson, 2003; Tapley, 2010). The MARAC model was originally developed in Cardiff, Wales, and there are now 250 MARACs operating throughout the United Kingdom, with a pilot program underway in Australia (Salter, 2012). The MARAC approach involves regular meetings between police, domestic violence services, and other agencies (e.g., housing, health, children’s and youth services) in which interagency action plans for “high-risk” domestic violence cases are developed and coordinated. Such plans may involve enhanced police surveillance of perpetrators, the management of child protection interventions as well as the coordination of health care for affected women and children, all of which have been flagged as critical to interventions in MDV. The potential that ill-timed child protection or police investigations may result in an escalation of MDV against women and children may be ameliorated through enhanced information sharing across agencies participating in MARACs. This model corresponds with need for “strategic and operational approaches” approaches to violence against women that have been identified in research on MDV (Firmin, 2011, p. 88) and it could incorporate culturally specific programs and services with the intention of providing enhanced coverage for ethnic and migrant communities.

In many regards, the challenges of responding to MDV overlap with the challenges of domestic violence more broadly, including the complexity of vulnerable clients at high risk of revictimization, with an accumulation of psychological, psychosocial, and physical health needs, and (often) responsibilities to their own children. However, the difficulty of this work is exacerbated in the case of MDV by other factors. Whether in gangs or in cultural contexts that promote MDV, victimized girls and women subject may be particularly

reluctant to disclose where they have been socialized to cooperate in their own abuse and the abuse of others (Gill, 2011; Miller, 1998). Girls and women in gangs who have co-offended alongside male partners may be concerned that disclosing their victimization may result in prosecution (Cooper, 2004) while girls and women in ethnic and migrant communities are often concerned about bringing shame to their family or community (Kasturirangan, et al., 2004). Furthermore, services may not accurately identify and acknowledge the degree of fear, violence, and risk experienced by victims of MDV (Cooper, 2004). Researchers such as Cooper, Anaf, and Bowden (2006) and Sarson and MacDonald (2007) have documented multi-perpetrator aggression in criminal organizations and families so severe that they argue the vocabulary of “child abuse” or “domestic violence” is insufficient to describe violence that is more accurately labeled “torture.”

Conclusion

This article has drawn together the literature on MDV, a neglected form of organized criminality in which abusive relationships form the locus of coordinated physical and sexual offences against women. MDV may occur alongside other forms of organized crime, as in the case of gangs, or it may arise through the support and participation of family, friends, and associates in domestic violence. When viewed collectively, the two contexts of MDV described in this article share a number of points of commonality, in particular the role of collective violence in affirming and perpetuating norms of masculine control and domination within groups and communities. Meeto and Safia Mirzi (2007) emphasize the ways in which socioeconomic deprivation of the kind experienced by many migrant, refugee, and ethnic communities can catalyze a cultural trend toward patriarchal and conservative values that promote violence against women. Gang-related MDV also emerges from socioeconomically deprived communities in which marginalized boys and men seek to enhance their prestige through violence and criminality in the absence of more constructive alternatives (Messerschmidt, 1993). An understanding of MDV that acknowledges the intersectionality of gender, ethnicity, and class, and the legitimization of violence by cultural, religious, and social values, avoids the politicized projection of MDV onto vulnerable and marginalized communities. It also acknowledges the fluidity and polyphonic quality of culture and the potential of alternative configurations of social power to protect women and encourage desistance from violence.

There are a range of obstacles to the investigation, prosecution, and treatment of domestic violence, including the perpetrator’s control over the victim through emotional, physical, and financial means. However, these obstacles are compounded in cases of cases of MDV, in which the efforts of a partner or ex-partner to abuse, harass, or stalk the victim is supported by criminal and/or familial associates and peers. These groups can have an interest in the control and silencing of a woman who may, in the case of organized crime and gangs,

divulge information to the police about illegal activities, or who may be seen as bringing her partner or community into disrepute. Victims of MDV present with a range of complex mental health and psychosocial problems that are intertwined with their risks of ongoing victimization. At present, frontline services are poorly resourced to meet these needs. While the involvement of police and child protection services can promote the well-being and safety of MDV victims and their children, it involves considerable risks as well. As research and service responses to domestic violence increasingly recognizes the diversity of victim experiences, new models of interagency case coordination are emerging that may provide the targeted and specialized interventions that have often been lacking in MDV cases. However, there remains a need for more investment in long-term support and counseling for women subject to serious, long-term abuse of the kind described by victims of MDV.

Implications for Practice, Policy, and Research

- Identifying girls and women who experience MDV: Women and girls reporting multi-perpetrator victimization are routinely ignored or disbelieved and face a range of barriers to disclosure. Workers and police require training in the heterogeneity of violence against women and children, including multi-perpetrator victimization. Policies and service arrangements to facilitate the gathering and sharing of intelligence on collective violence against women and girls is also crucial to identifying victims of MDV.
- Targeted interventions: There is a need for a strategic and structured approach to MDV (including specialist funded programs/services, interagency communication, clear management strategies and referral pathways) that supports girls and women to exit from abusive groups and networks, whether these groups are based in organized crime groups or in cultural communities. Interagency cooperation would appear to be crucial to ensuring that interventions in MDV do not inadvertently trigger an escalation of violence against the victims and/or others.
- Treating MDV: Victims of MDV are likely to require long-term therapeutic support in order to overcome exposure to chronic violence and traumatization. The specific combination of multi-perpetrator physical and sexual violence experienced by some victims is likely to have both mental and physical health implications that are often overlooked or go untreated in the health system.
- Further research: While a significant minority of girls and women reporting domestic violence report MDV, relatively little is known about their experiences and there is a clear need for more research in this area. The available research evidence is dispersed across a range of areas and there is a lack of standardized terminology. Further research would provide an evidence base to

develop a clearer understanding of this area. It is clear that research into MDV requires not only quantitative measures of perpetrators and incidents but methodologies that are more sensitive to relational dynamics and patterns, such as case reviews and qualitative interviews with victims and workers. There is also very little information on instances of MDV where males (rather than females) are identified as the victims, and this bears further examination as well.

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Note

1. An analysis of domestic violence incidents in Idaho drawn from the National Incident Based Reporting System found that 17.7% of incidents involved multiple offenders (Idaho State Police, 2003), but these data are not presented for comparability here since it include male as well as female complainants. This study is considered in more detail shortly.

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