



Mulvihill, N., & Wicky, L. (2024). Victim of Abuse, Violence, or Harm? Naming Gender-Based Violence in French and English. *DePICTions*. <https://parisinstitute.org/victim-of-abuse-violence-or-harm/>

Peer reviewed version

License (if available):
CC BY

[Link to publication record in Explore Bristol Research](#)
PDF-document

This is the accepted author manuscript (AAM). The final published version (Version of Record) can be found on the publisher's website. The copyright of any third-party content, such as images, remains with the copyright holder.

University of Bristol - Explore Bristol Research

General rights

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite only the published version using the reference above. Full terms of use are available: <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/red/research-policy/pure/user-guides/ebr-terms/>

Victim of Abuse, Violence, or Harm? Naming Gender-Based Violence in French and English

Natasha Mulvihill and Lucie Wicky

Abstract

The language used to describe the embodied experience of “victims of gender-based violence” is contested and evolving. Descriptions of violence are shaped by socio-historic context and by academic, media, and legal discourses. These in turn inform and delimit the production of knowledge. Yet victims themselves may struggle to recognise their experience in these words. We explore how lexical choices in French and in English construct and categorise individuals who experience sexual and domestic violence. We call for a more radical commitment to reflexively naming, collecting, and publishing data, and for the direct involvement of individuals with lived experience in shaping that work.

Introduction

The authors of this article met through a visiting scholarship in 2023: Lucie from France, visiting Natasha in the UK. Both of us research sexual and/or domestic violence. In our conversations about our work, we realised that there were lexical differences between French and English in describing the embodied experience of violence. We reflected also how the people we spoke to in our research did not always recognise their experience in the terminology used by academics, the media, or the law. Some, indeed, actively resisted the labels used. Through our work listening to and documenting personal histories of violence, we knew that “naming” is both difficult and important for victims. We decided therefore to try and map the lexical choices that we encountered in our work and consider their implications, drawing also on the insights of other researchers.

We acknowledge that this commentary is informed by our linguistic and disciplinary identities, and our different experiences and focus as researchers. Natasha is an English-speaking and UK-based criminologist, working predominantly with adult females who have experienced different forms of gender-based violence. Natasha uses small-scale surveys, document analysis, and semi-structured interviews to do this. Lucie is a French-speaking and France-based sociologist looking at men’s experiences of sexual violence over the life course (mainly suffered during childhood and adolescence). She draws on nationally representative surveys and biographical interviews to analyse these men’s experiences.

We start by recognising the evolution and use of the term “victim” in relation to gender-based violence, and the emergence of the “survivor” or “victim-survivor” discourse in English-speaking contexts. We then consider the term “violence,” including within “domestic violence.” We explore how and why “violence” has increasingly been superseded by “abuse” in English, yet has remained the pervasive lexical root for sexual and partner violence in French. More recently, there has been a shift in English-speaking contexts to the use of the word “harm,” but no parallel development in France. We consider victim engagement with these varying terms and the implications for research methods, as well as future challenges.

The “Victim”

Historically, the term “victim” has religious roots, coming from the Latin *victima* meaning “sacrifice.” This etymology, argues Van Dijk, implies “a moral imperative of unconditional forgiveness, as exemplified by the life of Jesus Christ, and a role expectation for victims of “passive suffering.”¹ This in turn informs the Western idea of the “ideal victim”² as someone who exhibits particular characteristics: innocence, helplessness, and quiet distress. The ideal victim is also a victim destroyed, for life.³ Enacting the victim role well can elicit social sympathy, support, and sometimes official recognition and compensation.⁴ However, constructed as an exemplar, this image of the *ideal victim* is difficult for individuals to attain, since they are often suspected of bearing at least some responsibility for the violence that they have endured. The social resonance of a label also has implications for how individuals subjectively interpret their experience. For “victims,” this social meaning impacts how they make sense of what has happened to them, how they understand their identity, and how they recover from their experience.⁵

Victim Blaming

Before feminist activism brought it into public consciousness, sexual violence and abuse was understood as a private and often shameful issue.⁶ Contemporary notions of “honour” and “shame” tend to be associated with particular national or faith groups, but it is important to underline that these ideas also underpinned Western societies and indeed endure in some spaces.⁷ Shame can also co-occur with guilt and this applies to both men and women.⁸ Guilt likely emerges from the interaction between social narratives and individual perception. Victim-blaming narratives persist in

the media, in the criminal justice system, and in everyday conversation. For example, victims of sexual violence are blamed for their clothes; blamed for being in the wrong place; blamed for seeking intimacy but not sex; blamed for being provocative, even when they are children.⁹ Victims of domestic abuse are blamed for not leaving their violent partner. Nevertheless, the original impulse of second wave feminists to proclaim victimhood in the face of men's violence was an assertion that this happens—and happens at scale—and it is not the fault of women and children.

Victim to Survivor

Some within the feminist movement moved quickly beyond the idea of the victim to embrace the notion of the “survivor.”¹⁰ This was to recognise the ways in which women sought to manage, challenge, and overcome violence. Indeed, there was a later and broader movement within criminology that also questioned the idea of the crime “victim”¹¹ because of its stereotypical associations with passivity and helplessness.¹² Commonly, the terms “victim” and “survivor” were applied to different points over time, which suggested that individuals moved naturally from trauma to recovery. Further work has explored the development from “surviving” to “thriving.”¹³ Judith Herman's work, however, shows that the journey to recovery is complex.¹⁴ In practice, the identities of victim and survivor see-saw, co-exist, or may be rejected completely.¹⁵

Race, gender, and other intersections of identity may impact how individuals who have experienced sexual violence relate to these labels.¹⁶ For example, racist and colonial discourses constructed Black, Asian, Latina, and Indigenous women as “hypersexualised,” “exotic,” “submissive,” or “unrapeable.”¹⁷ The historical legacy of these ideas produces a racialised and classed notion of who is a worthy victim.¹⁸ In turn:

Cultural narratives around strength and overcoming oppression may further shape whether women of colour self-identify as “victims” or “survivors.” For instance, the “strong Black woman” stereotype—the idea that Black women must sacrifice their own wellbeing for their families and communities in the face of racial struggle—may shape Black women's self-understandings in ways that reduce “victim” identification yet increase “survivor” identification.¹⁹

Some researchers of gender-based violence writing in English will elide the two terms, coining the neologism “victim-survivor.” However, this is not common among French writers. Lucie's (second author) research involves surveying and conducting follow-up interviews with male adults who have experienced child sexual abuse. She notes that some of the men do not actually mention their experience of violence in interview. Nor do they perceive themselves as “victims.” It appears that this silence can sometimes stem from a belief that their experience did not “qualify” as violence and/or they did not perceive it as having a serious impact on their life. Lucie prefers to talk in terms of “people who have been exposed to” or “suffered from” or “experienced” violence.

More recently, the term “lived experience” features commonly, as in “individuals with lived experience of ...” Borrowed from the research methodology Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis²⁰ (often shortened to IPA), “lived experience” enters into the subjectivity of research participants and requires researchers to acknowledge reflexively their contribution to making meaning with, and for, others. As a commitment to participant voice, and as a way of sidestepping the victim-survivor debate, the phrase “lived experience” may be useful.

Naming Violence

Just as the label “victim” has individual and social resonance, so too does how we name the injurious practices that victims have experienced. Violence can be named by “the violated, the violator, those

dealing with violence and those who analyse violence.”²¹ We would argue that the authoritative version that emerges of what violence *means* is governed by relations of power.²² For example, commonly it is the legal system which has governed how society understands and defines sexual violence, rather than the individuals who have experienced violence themselves. It was not until 1994 that the law in France explicitly criminalised rape within marriage. In the UK, there is no explicit offence for marital rape: instead, the presumption in common law, that being married would exempt prosecution for rape, was overturned by the House of Lords in 1991. Its recognition in law in the 1990s does not preclude that, in reality, marital rape occurred for centuries prior.

It is not just law that exercises this social authority, however. The media, researchers, and policymakers all have a hand in naming and not naming. For example, in her study of intimate partner violence within same-sex female relationships, Barnes²³ shows how her participants struggled to articulate what they were experiencing. Given the prevailing context of gender-power relations, male perpetration and female and child victimisation are the common paradigm. But this can silence other configurations of gender in relationships (including non-binary, trans, and queer identities) and other circumstances (for example, child-to-parent violence or where someone is both victim and perpetrator). Amidst the challenges posed by the legal definition of violence, which differs from the social definition, researchers must strike a balance between the accounts of victims, the existing literature, and the definition they employ. In her work, Lucie (second author) uses a definition of violence that encompasses violence which may not be explicitly labelled as such by victims.²⁴ This is a way of recognising the named and the unnamed.

Defining Violence

In everyday conversation, people may take an exemplar approach to defining violence. They explain it, for example, by citing actions such as “hitting” or “punching.” For academic researchers, definitions may depend on which discipline they work in. The American Psychological Association, for example, foregrounds the individual and interpersonal nature of violence, describing it as, “the expression of hostility and rage with the intent to injure or damage people or property through physical force.”²⁵

Hamby says that to be considered violence, a behaviour has to be (a) intentional, (b) unwanted, (c) nonessential, and (d) harmful.²⁶ She makes these distinctions in order to distinguish violence from, for example, medical surgery, boxing, or consensual bondage, domination, sadism, and masochism (BDSM). The definition does, however, open up questions about what is meant by “unwanted” (where a victim is groomed or manipulated, or they do not understand what is happening) and what is meant by “harm.” Perhaps the most fulsome definition comes from public health. The World Health Organisation defines violence as:

The intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation.²⁷

Like Hamby, this approach recognises reckless violence (“intentional” with a “high likelihood”), as opposed to accidental. It includes injury to mental health and the denial of human flourishing as forms of violence, which means that non-material harms and impact over time are recognised.

Violence, Power, and Structural Violence

Importantly, the WHO definition above also makes specific reference to power and recognises the broader ramifications for a group or community. This explicitly connects violence to social relations

of power and is an interpretation fundamental to many justice movements, including anti-racism and feminism. It is also critical for victims in seeing their experience as connected rather than isolated.

Introducing the Convention on Preventing and Combatting Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (also known as the Istanbul Convention), the Council of Europe asserts that:

Stalking, sexual harassment, sexual violence (including rape), physical, and psychological abuse at the hands of intimate partners, forced marriage, and forced sterilisation are deeply traumatising acts of violence. The overwhelming majority of victims are women.²⁸

United Nations data, for example, suggests that 55% of murdered females globally are killed by their intimate partners or other family members, compared to 12% of males: in 2022, this amounted to 48,800 women and girls.²⁹ The disproportionate impact on women as a group means that “violence against women shall be understood to constitute a violation of human rights and a form of discrimination.”³⁰ Looking at child victims, both boys and girls are affected by domestic violence in the home and by sexual violence in public and private spaces.³¹ It is for this reason that some researchers draw on work by John Galtung to describe male violence against women and children as a form of “structural violence.”³² It is structural in the sense that it is large-scale, patterned, and socially unjust. Paradoxically, it is visible, in the sense that people are aware of this violence; yet it is so normalised and persistent that its presence can be taken for granted and unchallenged.

So, having established that violence has both an individual and structural dimension, we want to consider what it means to be a victim of sexual or domestic “violence.” We also reflect how, in English-speaking countries, there has been a shift to talking about “abuse” or even “harm,” while French-speakers have continued to use the term “violence.” We will first consider this in relation to domestic violence/abuse towards adults before reflecting what this means for talking about sexual violence/abuse towards children.

Domestic Violence Against Adults

Domestic violence has been the dominant term in the UK used by service providers, campaigners, and within the media in recent decades. It was popularly associated in the public mind with the “wife with a black eye,” suggesting that domestic violence meant *physical* violence, and applied only to married heterosexual couples. Other terms in Western English-speaking countries suggest something similar: conjugal violence; marital violence; spouse (or spousal) violence; and wife (or woman) battering. For this reason, perhaps, a broader range of terms have been adopted, including intimate partner violence, partner violence or interpersonal violence—although the latter loses the intimate context.

The prefix “domestic” can also suggest that such violence must occur within the home space and relate to co-habiting partners. Instead, domestic violence includes all intimate partners, whether living together or not. It can include dating relationships and can extend beyond the formal end of an intimate relationship: indeed, up to 90% of women who leave an abusive partner continue to experience stalking, harassment, or abuse.³³

Hearn and McKie describe male-perpetrated domestic violence as “planned, repeated, heavy, physically damaging, non-defensive, premeditated, [and] non-retaliatory” and they link it to “sexual forms of violence, as well as most economic, collective, institutional, organised and military violence.”³⁴ However, given that violence in English is often associated with physical acts and physical injury, it may fail to capture the broader scope of what occurs in violent relationships. This includes manipulating partners emotionally and psychologically; taking control of a partner’s income

and the household finances;³⁵ preventing a partner from practising their faith;³⁶ or monitoring their phone and emails.³⁷ The violence may also be displaced, such as hurting companion animals³⁸ or destroying the victim's cherished property. Without understanding that these behaviours also constitute "domestic violence," individuals may not recognise themselves as "victims." In English, this has accelerated a shift to using the phrase "domestic abuse," and the increasing use of another term, "coercive control."³⁹

From Violence to Abuse

"Abuse" has the advantage of being a more expansive term in English. It enables inclusion of the less visible, less tangible and often insidious ways in which perpetrators may seek to hurt, threaten, and control their victims. However, it has attracted criticism. First, Follingstad suggests that abuse is not a scientific term but "rather a social judgement that behaviour has surpassed an acceptable threshold of conflict into deliberate attempts to harm."⁴⁰ The problem with this, she argues, is that survey researchers cannot operationalise such thresholds without engaging in moral determinations, which are then likely to result in error.

A second concern is that "abuse" may not capture and convey to the public and to policymakers its serious nature and impact on victims. This is perhaps where the term "violence" is more effective. For example, Natasha (first author) was recently researching police perpetrators of domestic abuse.⁴¹ Since the nature of the abuse was serious and multi-level—including physical and sexual abuse of the partner, children, and animals; threats to kill and strangulation; leveraging police knowledge and resources to control and coerce—it was decided to dispense with the term "domestic abuse" and describe these individuals as "sexual and violent police perpetrators." In other work, looking at faith and coercive control,⁴² Natasha similarly felt that the term "spiritual abuse" did not adequately communicate the scope and seriousness of the issue. This included, for example, perpetrators claiming that the marital bed was "sanctified," which they believed therefore gave them unlimited sexual access. It is for the same reason that Stewart and colleagues chose the term "verbal violence," rather than "verbal abuse," in their study of police callouts:

For the purpose of this research, we have chosen the term "verbal violence" to reflect the gravity of the descriptions of behaviour recounted by participants, and to present it as a subcategory of domestic violence. We define verbal violence as verbally aggressive behaviour which may include loud yelling, verbal attacks, intimidation, threats, demeaning remarks, and verbal attempts to control and isolate the victim. It may (or may not) be accompanied by other forms of violence. We view it as part of a continuum of domestic violence.⁴³

In summary, the concern is that the term 'abuse' may not fully convey the material and psychological force experienced by victims, or the scope and impact of perpetrator behaviours.

Abuse versus 'abus'

A third concern is that the English term "abuse" implies that a correct "use" exists:

[The term] "abuse" can suggest that there is or could be a legitimate use of men's power with women that men are "abusing," just as the term "child abuse" can legitimate adults' legitimate use of children.⁴⁴

This is more explicit in the French language, where *abus* means to use badly or excessively: for example, to abuse alcohol or to abuse someone's goodwill. However, this does not translate well in terms of embodied abuse, because children or adults cannot be "used" in the first place. Possibly, it would be like English speakers talking about "sexual *misuse*" (which does not sound correct to

English ears) instead of “sexual *abuse*”: in French, *abus* covers both terms. Furthermore, in English, “child abuse” is understood to be abuse during childhood; in French, it would imply the child is misused.

However, *abus* is used in France in the specific context of sexual violence committed in the Catholic Church, as evidenced by a recent French report.⁴⁵ There is potentially an internationalisation effect where intense media coverage—including through English-speaking documentaries and films on institutional and organisational child sexual abuse (such as the 2015 film *Spotlight*, directed by Tom McCarthy)⁴⁶—has meant that the term is filtering into the French language. For these reasons, the utilisation of “sexual abuse” following the publication of the Church abuse report has been critical for academic researchers presenting their results, since it may then gain wider traction within global academic and policy audiences (for example, at the 2021 conference “Confronting Sexual Violence: Actors’ Resistance, Researchers’ Tools” [*Faire face aux violences sexuelles. Résistances des actrices, outils des chercheur-e-s*]).⁴⁷

Adults and Children

This also raises the question of why, in the English language, we have tended to refer to sexual “abuse” in relation to children, but sexual “violence” in relation to adults. It appears that “abuse” is invoked when we are referring to a misuse of power or position, and also that sexual violence against children tends to be theorised separately to sexual violence against adults. Yet as Whittier argues:

A theory of rape that ignores sexual assault against minors is incomplete, particularly given the prevalence of rape against children and adolescents. Child sexual abuse is fundamentally shaped by intersectional inequalities of gender, race, and class, which structure individual-level experiences, prevalence, cultural representations, and state and institutional responses. An intersectional feminist approach to sexual violence should also foreground age, recognizing children and adolescents as a group that is structurally unequal and subject to control and domination by adults.⁴⁸

It is further interesting to note that in England and Wales, there is a statutory definition for child sexual exploitation⁴⁹ but not for adults, although increasingly local adult safeguarding boards are developing their own (for example, Northumberland Children and Adults Safeguarding Partnership).⁵⁰ Together, they suggest a slow reluctance to recognise that adults can also be sexually groomed and subject to abuse of power and, indeed, that all sexual violence can be understood as an abuse of power.

Holding on to ‘Violence’

In the major surveys on violence against women in France, notably ENVEFF⁵¹ [*Enquête nationale sur les violences envers les femmes en France*; in English, National Survey of Violence Against Women in France], researchers have focused on explicating types of violence. In ENVEFF, the term *violence* is used by sector (domestic, intra-family, etc.) but also by type (sexual, psychological, economic, etc.). Survey researchers sought explicitly to ensure that *violences* against victims meant more than the physical dimension, and this appears to be well understood in wider French society. Notably the French term for “rape” is *viol*, again underscoring its root in violence.

Following the publication of the first ENVEFF results in 2003,⁵² the term most often used in scientific and media discussion was “*violences contre les femmes*,” i.e., violence pluralised. It is also the term used in public policy. Over the past decade, the terminology has shifted towards “*les violences basées/fondées sur le genre*” or “*violences de genre*” (gender-based violence). While in 2016, gender-based violence was understood to be “violence by men as men against women as

women,”⁵³ the definition has recently evolved to maintain a focus on gender while broadening the relations of power that it encompasses, notably including violence experienced by LGBTQ individuals.⁵⁴

Gender

A definition that only specifies female victims raises the question of how to recognise sexual violence experienced by men. Lucie’s research in France demonstrates that such violence is predominantly perpetrated by men⁵⁵—so it is still gender-based violence, if we understand it by focusing on the perpetrators. Lucie conceives gender-based violence therefore as violence committed by men and/or by individuals in a position of structural and/or situational dominance related to gender. This may be compounded by age, sexuality, class, race, and so on. Thus, gender-based violence remains predominantly “*violences masculines*” (male violence), because it serves as a tool of male domination,⁵⁶ as well as domination related to other intersectional relations of power.

This definition of gender-based violence also allows for an understanding of violence committed by women. In the case of female perpetrators, they are not in a structural position of gender domination, but they may hold power in other social relations, particularly age, as seen in Lucie’s research. For example, in one interview that she conducted, a male participant related having sexual intercourse at the age of 8 with a 35-year-old female neighbour, even though he explains that he “did not understand what was happening” (and even though, elsewhere in the interview, he articulates sexual violence committed by his brothers when he was 7 years old). In other words, the participant did not identify or name this as *violence* when it was a woman perpetrator, despite there being a clear age-power relation between the adult and the child. It was the same for a second participant that Lucie interviewed, who had his first (forced) sexual encounter at the age of 8 with a 40-year-old beautician. He explains how his mother took him to this woman, to have sex.⁵⁷

From Abuse to Harm

A third term, which is increasingly being used in English to capture the breadth of sexual violence and abuse is “sexual harm.” There does not appear to be a parallel development in France. In explaining her use of the term “sexual harm,” Ilea⁵⁸ explains first that sexual violence suggests physical injury, which is not always applicable; and second that sexual violence tends to be proscribed by legal categorisation. This concern to capture practices which fall outside of the criminal law, but which are nevertheless considered harmful, is consistent with a critical criminology or zemiological (or social harm) perspective. These intellectual traditions recognise that crime has no ontological status or real existence outside of the meanings that societies invest in it. This suggests—as we saw with the marital rape example earlier—that definitions of crime may reflect the interests of the dominant groups in society. To focus on “harm” can mean capturing marginalised experiences, experiences that do not qualify as violence, and emerging practices for which the law is often playing catch-up.

However, Gavey and Farley express concern about the adoption of the term “sexual harm” in New Zealand policy-making.⁵⁹ This is not because they are concerned to include only physical violence or criminal acts, but because they are worried about how “harm” functions in discourse about violence against women. They argue that “sexual harm” continues a trend in ignoring the gendered cultural conditions that make sexual violence possible, focusing on what the problem is rather than *why* it is. Further, they suggest that harm is a vague term, which serves only to “cleav[e] the effect (harm) from the act that causes it,” i.e., violence.⁶⁰ The authors develop this to consider how harm can be leveraged as a yardstick by which victims of sexual violence are assessed for veracity and trauma impact.⁶¹

Drawing on a study by Fredriksen,⁶² who used a rape case vignette with focus groups of young men aged 18-25, Gavey and Farley note that the men were well versed in the “horror” of rape,⁶³ but this awareness led them to assume and search for clues of harm in the victim’s manner, actions, and speech:

All of these questions were filtered through a discourse of trauma, which can prescribe normative ways in which the legitimate victim is expected to be harmed by rape and how she will then be expected to behave. This shows how an ostensibly progressive concern for the harm of sexual violence can be turned on and against women who disclose they have been sexually violated by a man.⁶⁴

In summary, the risk of focusing on “harm” is that we become (or continue to be) preoccupied with evaluating the victim’s performance and assessing impact, rather than focusing on the wrongness of the original act. We suggest that gender-based violence can be understood only by studying the perpetration of violence (contexts of exposure, types of violence, power dynamics, and so on), the voices and testimonies of those who have experienced it, and the consequences it *can* (but not will or should) have on individuals’ lives.

Reluctant Representation and Research Methods

A final issue is how language links to representation in a way that someone cannot see their accurate reflection in the terminology and may even actively resist. In her review of the challenges of measuring violence against women in surveys or interviews, Follingstad notes for example that “some respondents may endorse being ‘thrown around’ but not ‘beaten up.’”⁶⁵ She says also that emotional abuse may be “particularly hard to discern and measure.”⁶⁶ In author Lucie’s research on sexual violence experienced by men, she observes that this is particularly evident in cases of violence experienced during sexual initiation between men. Gay men in her research described practices as “not really consensual” or within a “grey area,” while emphasising that they did not consider it as sexual violence. This may be due to the difficulty in identifying such violence in a social context where it is assumed that gay men cannot be raped because they engage in sexual activity with other men; where the age difference between partners and the resulting power dynamics may be eroticized; but also perhaps to protect the LGBT community as a whole,⁶⁷ which is already stigmatised elsewhere.

The authors also know from their work that female interviewees may react to the term “rape,” either because it feels too strong or because they are unsure whether their experience meets the threshold to be called “rape.”⁶⁸ There is also confusion on the distinction between rape and sexual assault,^{69 70} which have been differentiated in English and French law, but are often used interchangeably in everyday speech.

For this reason, in quantitative surveys on gender-based violence, legal qualifications and common terms may be omitted in favour of a description of the experiences endured. In VIRAGE [*Violences et rapports de genre*; in English, Violence and Gender Relations],⁷¹ for example, the latest survey on gender-based violence in France, the researchers assumed at the outset that it is difficult to recognise oneself as a victim of violence; that legal categories are poorly understood; and that the representations surrounding violence are too strong to be named in the survey. So, in relation to sexual violence, the incidents are recorded in detail (touching endured, mouth penetration, etc.). The researchers then reconstruct the reference legal categories afterwards, based on the description provided.⁷²

Race and Age

Race, age, and other intersections may also impact how individuals perceive and communicate their experience. In interviewing children, for example, it would be inappropriate for police, social work, or academic interviewers to label their experiences: rather, the focus is on understanding exactly what has happened, and sometimes through external cues—using drawing or dolls.⁷³ In their survey exploring the relationship between gender, race, and experiences of sexual victimisation, Boyle and Rogers reflect that survey measures need to better explicate different racial and mixed heritage identities to do justice to individuals.⁷⁴ Researchers also need to ensure that minoritized identities are sufficiently reflected in research—this may require stratified sampling or actively encouraging research participation from groups of interest.

Naming and Empowerment

In some circumstances, explicitly naming violence can be important. Natasha (first author) has experienced using a detailed inventory of gender-based violence practices at the start of interviews, and notes how, for research participants, hearing experiences named and linked in this way can be a lightbulb moment. For example, they might never have considered that their partner hiding their contraceptives or purposefully removing a condom during sex is a form of reproductive coercion and can be understood as part of domestic violence. However, naming violence in interviews can also be felt as a form of violence in itself. Indeed, in the accounts of several men who have experienced sexual violence, Lucie found that the imposition of an external qualification—i.e., the terms “violence” or “rape”—on their experience, was often mentioned by participants as a “second violence.” It is therefore a matter of finding the right balance between what is recounted and how the researcher responds or expresses it.

Coercion

Further issues arise when individuals grapple with concepts such as “coercion.” It can sometimes be difficult cognitively to identify that activity occurred because of external pressure: victims may feel it was “unwanted,” but they are not clear if it was “forced.” This can be partly an individual reluctance to acknowledge coercion; partly because perpetrators are adept at laying the path for violence and subsequently re-presenting violence as consensual; and also because of the heavy social judgement that is made of victims, both when they are coerced *and* when they are judged as consenting.

Finally, coercion can occur at both the interpersonal and structural level.⁷⁵ To give an imaginary example, a young queer person facing discrimination and bullying in the workplace chooses to engage in sex work, presenting as female to male clients. Their difficult financial situation means they have less control over which clients they see, or what services they provide. Here, the constraints of age, gender identity, sexuality, and economics coalesce. Structural coercion can therefore co-exist with individual choice.

Co-producing Terms

All of this points to the need for careful attention to definitions and measurement. We have seen that researchers, the public, and victims themselves use different words for different reasons. Inter-disciplinary work in this space has also proliferated terms.⁷⁶ This can lead to “difficulties estimating the effects and consequences of” gender-based sexual and physical violence in society.⁷⁷ The best work emerges from the active involvement of individuals with experience of violence and abuse in defining, testing, and refining survey and interview measures, including consideration of how—and the impact of how—data is collected.⁷⁸ The Office for National Statistics in England and Wales appears to have carried out user engagement exercises in the recent redevelopment of domestic abuse measures.⁷⁹ To our knowledge, the involvement of individuals with lived experience of violence in

the design of quantitative research is rare in France; although there was some input by victim organisations in the writing of the VIRAGE survey.

Future Challenges

Despite the positive work of campaigners, policymakers, journalists, academics, and social movements over time, it remains a challenge to identify and communicate the experience and extent of physical and sexual violence. Some authors identify a tendency for backlash to follow any gains in women's equality⁸⁰ or when individuals speak out about their experience. For example, the implementation of Operation Yewtree in the UK, following revelations about large-scale sexual offending by a British media personality, very quickly descended into discussions about overzealous investigators, victims "jumping on the bandwagon," and a concern around judging actions in the past, as if sexual violence previously had been more culturally acceptable.⁸¹ "Backlash" against victims of sexual violence or partner abuse may better be understood as ongoing rather than cyclical.⁸²

We might imagine that increased awareness and public discussion about gender-based violence over the past decade would have led to increased accountability and even a reduction in prevalence. Certainly, recent media coverage and social movements—such as #MeToo—may assist some victims to recognise the violence they themselves have experienced.⁸³ But the means of victimisation appear only to morph and proliferate, particularly using emerging technologies. In addition to in-person physical and sexual violence, victims are now subject to issues such as online harassment, deepfake pornography, upskirting, or control and coercion through phone trackers and connected devices.⁸⁴ A wider introduction of home robots may also present challenges in the future.⁸⁵

Going forward, we hope that research can (a) recognise the diversity of victims and perpetrators while not losing sight of gender, power, and other intersections; and (b) find context-appropriate language that reflects experience and enables good measurement. We hope too that society continues to take victimhood seriously and that governments use research that is informed by lived experience to shape and to fund appropriate social, educative, and justice responses to gender-based violence.

[NATASHA MULVIHILL](#) is Associate Professor in Criminology at the University of Bristol in the UK.

[LUCIE WICKY](#) is a doctoral researcher in Sociology at the School for Advanced Social Studies (EHESS) and the French Institute of Demographic Studies (INED) as well as a Teaching Associate and Research Fellow at the University of Strasbourg in France.

natasha.mulvihill@bristol.ac.uk; lucie@wicky.fr

¹ Jan Van Dijk, "Free the Victim: A Critique of the Western Conception of Victimhood," *International Review of Victimology* 16.1 (2009): 1-33, here 8.

² Nils Christie, "The Ideal Victim," in Ezzat A. Fattah, ed., *From Crime Policy to Victim Policy*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1986, 17-30.

³ Alice Debauche, "Violences sexuelles," in Juliette Rennes, ed., *Encyclopédie critique du genre*, Paris : La Découverte, 2016, 691-700.

⁴ Jan Van Dijk, "Free the Victim," 25.

⁵ Shirley Jülich, Julienne Molineaux, and Maclom D. Green, "The strategic use of terminology in restorative justice for persons harmed by sexual violence," *The International Journal of Restorative Justice* 3.2 (2020): 215-234, here 218-219.

⁶ Alice Debauche, *Viol et rapports de genre: Émergence, enregistrements et contestations d'un crime contre la personne*, PhD thesis, Institut d'Études Politiques de Paris, 2011, 468.

- ⁷ Geetanjali Gangoli, Khatidji Chantler, and Marianne Hester, "Understanding forced marriage: definitions and realities," in Aisha Gill and Anitha Sundhari (eds.), *Forced marriage: introducing a social justice and human rights perspective*, London: Zed Books, 2011, 25-45.
- ⁸ Helene F. Aakvaag, Siri Thoresen, Tore Wentzel-Larsen, Grete Dyb, Espen Røysamb, and Miranda Olf, "Broken and guilty since it happened: A population study of trauma-related shame and guilt after violence and sexual abuse," *Journal of Affective Disorders* 204 (2016): 16-23.
- ⁹ See, e.g., Christine Barter, "Discourses of blame: deconstructing (hetero)sexuality, peer sexual violence and residential children's homes," *Child & Family Social Work* 11.4 (2006): 347-356. These ideas persist strongly, particularly for victims who do not conform to the "ideal victim." In France, on February 22, 2024, an initiative known as #MeTooGarçons [#MeTooBoys] was launched by an actor. The men who come forward with their testimonies appear to be taken seriously, as evidenced by the media response. However, there has been a backlash against gay men who testify, highlighting that not everyone can be an "ideal victim."
- ¹⁰ Kathleen Barry, *Female Sexual Slavery*, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1979, 274.
- ¹¹ Paul Rock, *Constructing Victims' Rights: The Home Office, New Labour, and Victims*, Clarendon Studies in Criminology, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, 624.
- ¹² Basia Spalek, *Crime Victims: Theory, Policy and Practice*, London: Bloomsbury, 2005, 216.
- ¹³ See, e.g., Nicole R. Nugent, Jennifer A. Sumner, and Ananda B. Amstadter, "[Resilience after trauma: from surviving to thriving](#)," *European Journal of Psychotraumatology* 5.1 (2014); Esme Fuller-Thomson, Ashley Lacombe-Duncan, Deborah Goodman, Barbara Fallon, and Sarah Brennenstuhl, "From surviving to thriving: factors associated with complete mental health among childhood sexual abuse survivors," *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology* 55 (2020): 735-744.
- ¹⁴ Judith L. Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, New York: Basic Books/Hachette Book Group, 1997, 304.
- ¹⁵ See, e.g., Jan Jordan, "From victim to survivor – and from survivor to victim: Reconceptualising the survivor journey," *Sexual Abuse in Australia and New Zealand* 5.2 (2013): 48-56.
- ¹⁶ Kaitline M. Boyle and Kimberly B. Rogers, "Beyond the Rape 'Victim'-'Survivor' Binary: How Race, Gender, and Identity Processes Interact to Shape Distress," *Sociological Forum* 35.2 (2020): 323-345.
- ¹⁷ Boyle and Rogers, "Beyond the Rape 'Victim'-'Survivor' Binary," 326.
- ¹⁸ Boyle and Rogers, "Beyond the Rape 'Victim'-'Survivor' Binary," 326.
- ¹⁹ Boyle and Rogers, "Beyond the Rape 'Victim'-'Survivor' Binary," 326.
- ²⁰ Katie Reid, Paul Flowers, and Michael Larkin, "Exploring Lived Experience," *The Psychologist* 18.1 (2005): 20-23.
- ²¹ Jeff Hearn and Linda McKie, "Gendered policy and policy on gender: the case of 'domestic violence,'" *Policy and Politics* 36.1 (2008): 75-91.
- ²² Liz Kelly, Sheila Burton, and Linda Regan, "Beyond Victim or Survivor: Sexual Violence, Identity and Feminist Theory and Practice," in Lisa Adkins and Vicki Merchant, eds., *Sexualizing the Social: Explorations in Sociology*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996, 77-101; Renate Klein, "Just Words? Purpose, Translation, and Metaphor in Framing Sexual and Domestic Violence through Language," in Renate Klein, ed., *Framing Sexual and Domestic Violence through Language*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 1-19.
- ²³ Rebecca Barnes, "I Still Sort of Flounder Around in a Sea of Non-Language': The Constraints of Language and Labels in Women's Accounts of Woman-to-Woman Partner Abuse," in Karen Throsby and Flora Alexander, eds., *Gender and Interpersonal Violence: Language, Action and Representation*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, 29-43.
- ²⁴ Lucie Wicky, *Parcours de violences rapports d'âge. Recherche par mixte méthode sur les violences sexuelles subies par les hommes*, PhD thesis, EHESS, forthcoming in 2024.
- ²⁵ American Psychological Association, "[Violence](#)," *Dictionary of Psychology*, 2018.
- ²⁶ Sherry Hamby, "On Defining Violence, and Why It Matters," *Psychology of Violence* 7.2 (2017): 167-180, here 167.
- ²⁷ Etienne G. Krug, Linda L. Dahlberg, James A. Mercy, Anthony B. Zwi, and Rafael Lozano, [World report on violence and health](#), Geneva: World Health Organization, 2002 [26 April 2024].
- ²⁸ Council of Europe, "[About the Convention](#)," 2024 [26 April 2024].
- ²⁹ United Nations, "[Facts and figures: Ending violence against women](#)," 2023 [26 April 2024].
- ³⁰ Council of Europe, [Explanatory Report to the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence \[the 'Istanbul Convention'\]](#), 2011, Article 3, para 40 [26 April 2024].
- ³¹ United Nations, [World Day for the Prevention of and Healing from Child Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Violence](#), 2022 [16 April 2024].
- ³² John Galtung, "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research," *Journal of Peace Research* 6.3 (1969): 167-191.
- ³³ Kathryn J. Spearman, Jennifer L. Hardesty, and Jacquelyn Campbell, "Post-separation abuse: A concept analysis," *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 79 (2023): 1225-1246.
- ³⁴ Hearn and McKie, "Gendered policy and policy on gender," 77.
- ³⁵ Nicola Sharp-Jeffs, "Understanding the Economics of Abuse: An Assessment of the Economic Abuse Definition Within the Domestic Abuse Bill," *Journal of Gender-Based Violence* 5.1 (2021): 163-173.

- ³⁶ Natasha Mulvihill, Nadia Aghtaie, Andrea Matolcsi, and Marianne Hester, “UK victim-survivor experiences of intimate partner spiritual abuse and religious coercive control and implications for practice,” *Criminology & Criminal Justice* 23.5 (2023): 773-790.
- ³⁷ Delanie Woodlock, Mandy McKenzie, Deborah Western, and Bridget Harris, “Technology as a Weapon in Domestic Violence: Responding to Digital Coercive Control,” *Australian Social Work* 73.3 (2020): 368-380.
- ³⁸ Amy J. Fitzgerald, Betty Jo Barrett, Allison Gray, and Chi Ho Cheung, “The Connection Between Animal Abuse, Emotional Abuse, and Financial Abuse in Intimate Relationships: Evidence From a Nationally Representative Sample of the General Public,” *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 37.5-6 (2022): 2331-2353.
- ³⁹ The UK organisation *Refuge* [defines](#) coercive control as “an act, or a pattern of acts, of assault, threats, humiliation and intimidation that abusers use to harm, punish or frighten survivors. It doesn't relate to a single incident – it is a purposeful pattern of behaviour” [5 March 2024]. Coercive control became a named offence in England and Wales under [Section 76 Serious Crime Act 2015](#) [5 March 2024]. There are calls in France to introduce a similar offence: see, for example, *The Conversation*, “[Domestic violence: criminalising coercive control in France could bring more justice to victims](#),” 16 January 2024 [5 March 2024].
- ⁴⁰ Diane R. Follingstad, “The Challenges of Measuring Violence Against Women,” in Claire Renzetti, Diane Follingstad and Ann Coker, eds., *Preventing Intimate Partner Violence: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, Bristol: Bristol University Press. 2017, 57-81, here 59.
- ⁴¹ Natasha Mulvihill and Fay Sweeting, “Sexual and violent police perpetrators: the institutional response to reporting victims,” currently under review.
- ⁴² See Mulvihill, Aghtaie, Matolcsi, and Hester, “UK victim-survivor experiences.”
- ⁴³ Catherine Carolyn Stewart, Debra Langan, and Stacey Hannem, “Victim Experiences and Perspectives on Police Responses to Verbal Violence in Domestic Settings,” *Feminist Criminology* 8.4 (2013): 269-294, here 270.
- ⁴⁴ Hearn and McKie, “Gendered policy and policy on gender,” 77.
- ⁴⁵ Ciase [*Commission Indépendant sur les Abus Sexuels dans l'Église*], 2021. [Final report](#) [26 April 2024].
- ⁴⁶ Tom McCarthy, “*Spotlight*,” Open Road Films (II), 2015.
- ⁴⁷ See: <https://fairefacevs.hypotheses.org/>.
- ⁴⁸ Nancy Whittier, “Where Are the Children?: Theorizing the Missing Piece in Gendered Sexual Violence,” *Gender & Society* 30.1 (2016): 95-108, here 104-105.
- ⁴⁹ Department for Education, [Child sexual exploitation: Definition and a guide for practitioners, local leaders and decision makers, working to protect children from child sexual exploitation](#). London: HMSO, 2017 [26 April 2024].
- ⁵⁰ Northumberland Children and Adults Safeguarding Partnership, “[Exploitation: Sexual Exploitation](#)” (no date) [4 March 2024].
- ⁵¹ Especially [Enveff \[Enquête Nationale sur les Violences Envers les Femmes en France\]](#), French Institute of Demographic Studies (INED) [26 April 2024].
- ⁵² Maryse Jaspard, ed., *Les violences envers les femmes en France : une enquête nationale*, Paris: La Documentation française, 2003, 370.
- ⁵³ Ilaria Simonetti, “Violences (et genre)” in Juliette Rennes, ed., *Encyclopédie critique du genre: Corps, sexualité, rapports sociaux*, Paris: La Découverte, 2016, 681-690, here 681.
- ⁵⁴ Pauline Delage, Marylène Lieber, and Natacha Chetcuti-Osorovitz, “Lutter contre les violences de genre. Des mouvements féministes à leur institutionnalisation. Introduction,” *Cahiers du Genre* 66.1 (2019): 5-16.
- ⁵⁵ Lucie Wicky, “[Rapports d'âge et vulnérabilités aux violences: Le cas des hommes ayant subi des violences sexuelles dans l'enfance](#),” *Populations Vulnérables* 9 (2023) [26 April 2024].
- ⁵⁶ Jalna Hanmer, “Men, Power, and the Exploitation of Women,” *Women's Studies International Forum* 13.5 (1990): 443-456.
- ⁵⁷ Lucie Wicky, *Parcours de violences et rapports d'âge*.
- ⁵⁸ Adina Ilea, “What About ‘the Sex Offenders’? Addressing Sexual Harm from an Abolitionist Perspective,” *Critical Criminology* 26.8 (2018): 357–372.
- ⁵⁹ Nicole Gavey and Jade Farley, “Reframing sexual violence as ‘sexual harm’ in New Zealand policy: A critique,” in Kersti Yllö and M. Gabriela Torres, eds., *Sexual Violence in Intimacy: Implications for Research and Policy in Global Health*, London: Routledge, 2020, chapter 14, here 231.
- ⁶⁰ Gavey and Farley, “Reframing sexual violence as ‘sexual harm’ in New Zealand policy,” 232.
- ⁶¹ Gavey and Farley, “Reframing sexual violence as ‘sexual harm’ in New Zealand policy,” 238.
- ⁶² Jessica Fredriksen, “*‘He Thought He Could Still Win It, You Know’: Young Men's Talk Around Consent and Sexual Violence*,” MA thesis, New Zealand: University of Auckland, 2018.
- ⁶³ Gavey and Farley, “Reframing sexual violence as ‘sexual harm’ in New Zealand policy,” 238.
- ⁶⁴ Gavey and Farley, “Reframing sexual violence as ‘sexual harm’ in New Zealand policy,” 238.
- ⁶⁵ Diane R. Follingstad, “The Challenges of Measuring Violence Against Women,” in Claire Renzetti, Diane Follingstad, and Ann Coker, eds., *Preventing Intimate Partner Violence: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, Bristol: Bristol University Press. 2017, 57-81, here 63.
- ⁶⁶ Diane R. Follingstad, “The Challenges of Measuring Violence Against Women,” 63.

-
- ⁶⁷ Catherine Donovan, Marianne Hester, Jonathan Holmes, and Melanie McCarry. *Comparing Domestic Abuse in Same Sex and Heterosexual Relationships*, University of Sunderland & University of Bristol, 2006.
- ⁶⁸ See, for example, Natasha Mulvihill, "Professional authority and sexual coercion: A paradigmatic case study of doctor abuse," *Social Science and Medicine*, Jul(305), (2022), 115093, here 4 and 5.
- ⁶⁹ Alice Debauche, "Enquêter sur le viol: entre sexualité et violence" in Maryse Jaspard and Natacha Chetcuti, eds., *Violences envers les femmes: trois pas en avant deux pas en arrière*, Paris: Editions l'Harmattan, 2007, 75-93; Elizabeth Brown, Alice Debauche, Christelle Hamel, and Magali Mazuy, *Violences et rapports de genre: Enquête sur les violences de genre en France*, Paris: Editions Ined, 2020, 525.
- ⁷⁰ Meredith E. Bagwell-Gray, Jill Theresa Messing, and Adrienne Baldwin-White, "Intimate Partner Sexual Violence: A Review of Terms, Definitions, and Prevalence," *Trauma Violence Abuse* 16.3 (2015): 316-335, here 316.
- ⁷¹ Brown, Debauche, Hamel, and Mazuy, eds., *Violences et rapports de genre*, 525.
- ⁷² Christelle Hamel, Alice Debauche, Elizabeth Brown, Amandine Lebugle, Tania Lejbowicz, Magali Mazuy, Amélie Charruault, Sylvie Cromer, and Justine Dupuis, "Rape and sexual assault in France: initial findings of the VIRAGE survey," *Population & Societies* 538.10 (2016): 1-4.
- ⁷³ See Carmit Katz and Irit Hershkowitz, "The Effects of Drawing on Children's Accounts of Sexual Abuse," *Child Maltreatment* 15.2 (2010): 171-179.
- ⁷⁴ Boyle and Rogers, "Beyond the Rape 'Victim'-'Survivor' Binary."
- ⁷⁵ Natasha Mulvihill, "Is it time to drop the term 'prostitution' from policy discourse?" *Journal of Gender-Based Violence* 3.3 (2019): 385-393.
- ⁷⁶ Bagwell-Gray, Messing, and Baldwin-White, "Intimate Partner Sexual Violence."
- ⁷⁷ Bagwell-Gray, Messing, and Baldwin-White, "Intimate Partner Sexual Violence," 316.
- ⁷⁸ See, for example: Office for National Statistics, [Crime Survey for England and Wales transformation research on the ethics of online data collection relating to sensitive topics: October 2020](#) [16 April 2024].
- ⁷⁹ See, for example, Office for National Statistics, [Redevelopment of domestic abuse statistics](#) [26 April 2024].
- ⁸⁰ Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*, New York: Vintage, 1991, 552.
- ⁸¹ See also Raj Persaud, "[How Silence Fixed It for Jimmy Savile – The Yewtree Child Sex Abuse Police Investigation Must Guard Against the Backlash](#)," *The Huffington Post*, 11 January 2013 [26 April 2024].
- ⁸² Molly Fischer, "The Real Backlash Never Ended," *The New Yorker*, 21 July 2022.
- ⁸³ Lucie Wicky, "[#MeTooGarçons: 'In France, 80% of violent acts against men affect those under 18'](#)," *The Conversation*, 21 March, 2024 [26 April 2024].
- ⁸⁴ See Leonie Tanczer's work on "[Gender and Tech](#)" at the University College London [26 April 2024].
- ⁸⁵ Katie Winkle and Natasha Mulvihill, "Anticipating the Use of Robots in Domestic Abuse: A Typology of Robot Facilitated Abuse to Support Risk Assessment and Mitigation in Human-Robot Interaction," *ACM/IEEE International Conference on Human-Robot Interaction*, Boulder, Colorado, 2024.