**Counting with understanding? What is at stake in debates on researching domestic violence**

**Abstract**

This paper addresses recent debates relating to the measurement of domestic violence, and in particular the ‘domestic violent crime’ framework proposed by Sylvia Walby and colleagues. We argue for the utility of coercive control as a framework for measurement of domestic violence, and highlight what we see as misrepresentation of this concept in the work of Walby and colleagues. We also point to the limitations of traditional crime codes in capturing the range of abuse suffered by victims of coercive control, and question whether measuring physical assault is any more straightforward in sample surveys than measuring non-violent forms of coercion. We conclude by calling for greater attention to qualitative narratives and practice-based knowledge to ensure that measurement frameworks reflect the lived experiences of victim-survivors.

**Key Words: Domestic violence, coercive control, survey measurement**

**Word count: 8189**

**Lead/corresponding author**

Dr Andy Myhill

College of Policing

1-7 Old Queen Street

Westminster

London SW1H 9HP

[andy.myhill@college.pnn.police.uk](mailto:andy.myhill@college.pnn.police.uk)

**Andy Myhill** is an Evidence and Evaluation Advisor at the UK College of Policing. He has published both academic papers and government reports on topics including domestic violence, public attitudes to the police, community engagement, and procedural justice.

**Second author**

Professor Liz Kelly

Child and Woman Abuse Studies Unit

London Metropolitan University

Tower Building

166-220 Holloway Road

London N7 8DB

[l.kelly@londonmet.ac.uk](mailto:l.kelly@londonmet.ac.uk)

**Liz Kelly** is professor of sexualised violence at London Metropolitan University. She has been active in the field of violence against women for forty years, and is the author of *Surviving Sexual Violence*, which established the concept of a 'continuum of violence', and over 100 book chapters and journal articles.

**Introduction**

The debate around measurement of domestic violence rumbles on, and has taken a new turn with the detailed work of Sylvia Walby and colleagues (Walby et al., 2016; Walby et al., 2017; Walby and Towers 2017; Walby and Towers, 2018) using Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) data to promote a particular approach to researching the scale and nature of violence against women (Walby et al., 2017). While we welcome the forensic excavation of data which is often hidden beneath headline findings from prevalence surveys, there are a number of theoretical and conceptual claims made within this recent work which are contested. These turn on several longstanding debates within social science in general and within the domestic violence field specifically: to what extent can survey data be used to capture complex social issues; what are defensible extrapolations from survey data, and how do these connect to theory; how should intimate partner violence be conceptualised and how does and should this connect to concepts in criminal and international law (see, for example, Merry, 2016).

Walby and Towers (2017; 2018) present a theoretical framework for measurement centred on what they term ‘domestic violent crime’ and in the process suggest the concept of coercive control (see Stark, 2007) is a theoretical distraction from the task they prioritise – illuminating and mainstreaming gender in the measurement of domestic violence. The domestic violent crime model is premised on several assumptions, primarily: that all physical violence in interpersonal relationships is essentially coercive and instrumental in nature; that the criminal law is the best framework for capturing the range of abuse and harm suffered by victims of domestic violence; and that counting the frequency of discrete acts of physical violence is the best method for revealing the gendered nature of domestic violence. Walby and Towers propose (2017:12) a ‘short survey’ module they claim will permit ‘comparisons of rates of gendered violence over time and place’ and contribute to the methodology required to ‘develop and test a theory of change for gendered violence’.

Drawing on the large international body of qualitative literature produced with survivors, and our own research careers which include smaller scale/bespoke surveys, examination of agency records and interviewing victim-survivors, we question these theoretical and conceptual assumptions. We argue that while a focus on physical violence helps illuminate the gendered nature of domestic violence in some respects, it obscures it in others. We further suggest that the criminal law, and the traditional crime categories that comprise it, are more open to interpretation than is acknowledged and do not reflect the continuous nature of the abuse experienced by many women, and that ‘harm’ needs to be interpreted more widely than (physical) injury resulting from discrete acts. While we acknowledge the importance and power of comparable quantitative measurement – the United Nations, for example, has called for nation states to undertake a femicide census – we also assert that engaging with qualitative research, in which the voices of victim-survivors are at the core, is a fundamental requirement for any theoretical conceptualisation of domestic violence, including how best to operationalise it in survey measurement. This is a debate which turns on whether measurement should be rooted *only* in abstract crime categories, or should endeavour also to reflect as much as possible what we understand about lived experience.

**The areas of contention**

Our disagreements with the theoretical and empirical position put forward by Walby and Towers (2017; 2018) centre on: misrepresentation of the theory of coercive control, and the published work of Evan Stark in particular; the utility of coercive control as a theoretical framework for understanding domestic violence; the nature and measurement of physical violence experienced by women in different contexts; and whether the criminal law and domestic violent crime model can ever get close to the lived experiences of victim-survivors.

*The misrepresentation of coercive control*

For those unfamiliar with this field, coercive control as a concept did not arise, as Walby and Towers (2018) imply, within debates around measurement of domestic violence. The framework of power and control sits at the heart of the earliest research with victim-survivors (see, for example, Dobash and Dobash, 1979; Kelly, 1987; Schechter, 1982), and the term coercive control emerged when activists began to equate survivors’ experiences with those of victims of other ‘capture’ crimes where the concept was already established (see Okun, 1986). Evan Stark’s (2007) development of a theory of coercive control built on this earlier work, and has been widely taken up as offering a more accurate conceptualisation of what living with domestic violence means for women and children. While Stark’s analysis extends previously influential frameworks[[1]](#footnote-1), he also argues that policy responses have atrophied into a focus only on safety and an over emphasis on criminal justice interventions. For him, core harms of domestic violence are how it limits women’s freedom and undermines the self, explicit in the subtitle of his book ‘how men entrap women in everyday life’ (Stark, 2007).

One part of our argument is, then, that Walby and Towers misrepresent the theoretical positions on coercive control, and fail to recognise its resonance for victim-survivors and those who support them. Their representation is partial, reduced to an issue of measurement (of which more later). Stark (2007) distinguishes coercive control from what he terms the ‘assault’ model, which arguably has a parallel with Walby and Towers’ concept of domestic violent crime. Drawing on human rights thinking, he defines domestic violence as a ‘liberty crime’ (Stark, 2007:13), arguing that abusive behaviours are wide-ranging and the control exerted is intended to and/or has the consequence of restricting women’s freedoms.

*Men deploy coercive control to secure privileges that involve the use of time, control over material resources … the main means used to establish control is the microregulation of everyday behaviours associated with stereotypic female roles, such as how women dress, cook, clean, socialize, care for their children, or perform sexually (Stark, 2007:5).*

In some publications he makes reference to the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (1993)which explicitly rooted violence against women in unequal power relations, highlighting its role in reproducing male domination and female subordination. This document, and other international conventions and policy statements since, refer specifically to ‘psychological violence and intimidation’ and the phrase ‘arbitrary restrictions on liberty’ appears in the Council of Europe 2011 Istanbul Convention. In international law, therefore, violence against women and within this domestic violence are understood in terms wider than national law definitions of ‘violent crime’. Such understandings have recently been encoded into national law in England and Wales (see Stark and Hester, 2019).

Walby and Towers (2018) suggest the theory of coercive control is premised on the motivation of the perpetrator, and that it downplays the salience of physical violence. That is not our reading. Stark is clear that both men and women can be motivated to control: what his theory recognises is that sexual inequality enables men to be more successful in this goal through the reproduction of gender orders and regimes (see Connell, 2010) at various levels of society, including the household (Morris, 2009). Walby and Towers (2018:5) also argue Stark ‘considers coercive control to be more detrimental to women’s wellbeing than physical violence’. We believe this position creates a false dichotomy between physical violence and non-physically violent forms of coercion that can both comprise a course of coercive and controlling conduct. Stark (2007:13) in fact describes violence as ‘critical’ and he is clear that physical violence is a core tactic used by many (though, importantly, not all) coercive and controlling abusers. He suggests (2017:18), citing Walby et al. (2016) among other sources, that violence is ‘repeated’ in a majority of cases, and might be regarded as ‘serial’ (physical) abuse in many, ‘where assaults occur several times a week or more’.

*The utility of coercive control as a theoretical framework*

We maintain that coercive control offers a more comprehensive explanatory framework to that presented by Walby and Towers (2017), one which complicates discussion of harm and reflects research documenting the lived experiences of victim-survivors. This body of work is rooted in qualitative research with both victims and perpetrators (see, for example, Pence and Paymar, 1993; Kelly and Westmarland, 2016; Kirkwood, 1993; Lundgren, 1998) and in decades of support work; in both, the concepts of power and control are foundational.

Walby and Towers (2017, 2018) suggest domestic violence should not be treated as a distinct form of violence. This position represents a departure from previous writing in which ‘the specialised nature of domestic violence as a ‘course of conduct’’ was acknowledged (Walby, 2005:195). We contend that domestic violence – or at least that suffered by women at the hands of male intimate partners – is a specific from of violence. While violent assaults that men experience in relationships may well fit into the same crime categories as those suffered by women, this violence is not located in an internationally recognised structural hierarchy which affords men more power in households and in society more generally. It is precisely this wider social context, rather than the simple frequency of physical violence, which explains why men are much less likely to report that they experienced violence as abusive and controlling, both in surveys and indeed when presenting to agencies as victims (see Hester et al., 2017). This reflects what the Dobashes (1979) referred to many years ago as a ‘context specific approach’, with the context being one in which structural hierarchies constitute and are constituted in violence. Eva Lundgren (1998) deepened this theoretical approach, drawing on depth interviews with victims and perpetrators to show how particular masculinities and femininities are created through violence. Whilst there was an argument in the 1970s, in response to the low status afforded domestic violence, that law enforcement and prosecutorial responses should echo those to criminal assaults outside the domestic sphere, scholarship since that time has recognised that, as a gendered course of conduct as opposed to a discrete incident or series of incidents, it requires a bespoke response.

In arguing that physical acts ‘that pass the threshold of criminal law’ (Walby and Towers, 2018:2) are sufficient to illuminate the gendered nature of domestic violence, Walby and Towers are, then, placing themselves outside the usual reference point for feminist perspectives (see, for example, McGlynn and Munro, 2012). These have been honed over decades through detailed critiques of the failure of statute law to reflect the realities both of domestic violence and violence against women more generally. It was precisely the inability of statute law to accommodate women’s experiences that led to countless campaigns (ongoing at the time writing in relation to ‘upskirting’) for its reform and extension. Sexual harassment has in fact been within policy definitions of violence against women for decades, but many forms are not covered by criminal law. Making criminal law the arbiter of what counts as abuse is problematic in relation to much feminist theory. Walby recognised this argument in earlier analysis, illustrating, with regard to measurement frameworks, ‘[t]he narrowest are usually the legal ones, and these carry a certain authority because of their status [but] typically omit acts which some women identify as acts of violence’ (Walby, 1994:128). Walby’s analysis of CSEW data also showed that a significant proportion of abuse recorded by the survey was not regarded as ‘criminal’ by those reporting it (Walby and Allen, 2004:124).

This area of contention, then, rests largely on the salience afforded to non-physical forms of coercion. While Walby and Towers (2018) restrict their analysis primarily to discrete acts of physical violence experienced directly by the victim, coercive control recognises wider forms of coercion and postulates a pattern of fear based subordination which traverses months and years. One of the powerful possibilities of coercive control is that it recognises bespoke combinations of controlling behaviours that perpetrators craft in relation to the individual they are abusing, these can include: undermining confidence in work, education or parenting; playing on insecure immigration status or mental health concerns; undermining women if they have been abused previously, and so on. It also accommodates the fact that abuse frequently incorporates threats to or abuse of children, relatives, friends and pets and that they may be harmed even where there is no direct abuse of them.

A further crucial difference between a theoretical framework premised on coercive control and that proposed by Walby and Towers concerns the calculus of ‘harm’. Walby and Towers’ (2017) proposed measurement framework has physical injury (or fear, in the case of non-violent threats) caused by each discrete assault as the indicator of harm. Though Stark acknowledges that many victims do suffer serious physical injury from specific assaults, he argues that harm for victims of coercive control, including their sense of generalised fear, ‘is the *cumulative result of all previous abuse*’ (Stark, 2017:19, emphasis in original). This analysis chimes with qualitative research which has shown over time and across jurisdictions that victim-survivors experience the continuous coercive nature of abuse as more harmful – psychologically and in some respects physically – than injuries sustained through discrete acts of physical violence (Dobash and Dobash, 1979; Goard and Tutty, 2002; Kelly, 1987; Kirkwood, 1993; Lundgren, 1998; Kelly et al., 2014). In addition, Stark and Hester (2019) note that, in relation to particular incidents, the level of injury to a primary perpetrator might be greater than to a primary victim, if for example a woman is using a weapon in self-defence in the context of ongoing coercive control.

To sum up, while Walby and Towers explore the operationalization of both gender and violence in survey methodology, since it is a consideration of measurement, how gender is lived, reproduced and constituted within violence sits outside the frame of the debate. Gender in the domestic violent crime model becomes a variable, albeit a theory laden one, rather than a structural, relational hierarchy. We agree with Walby’s earlier position on this issue, where she suggested ‘male violence against women has all the characteristics … of a social structure, and that it cannot be understood outside an analysis of patriarchal social structures’ (Walby, 1994:128). We are not convinced that knowing the extent and distribution of violent acts between women and men constitutes strong enough grounds to ‘adjudicate between … competing paradigms’ (Walby and Towers, 2017:12). This knowledge might provide a basis on which to explore theories of measurement, but is it really coterminous, as claimed, with explanations and causal pathways? Making the gender dimensions of domestic violence visible is an aim we support; we are less convinced that this is possible when gender is reduced to a variable within a measurement framework for survey methodology. At issue here is not just how to engage with the ‘gender symmetry’ debate (see Myhill, 2017), but how domestic violence has been understood since the 1970s as constituted in, through and of gender.

*The nature and measurement of physical violence*

A key assumption of the domestic violent crime framework is that all physical violence committed by intimate partners or family members is coercive and operates in an instrumental way, even if it is infrequent (Walby and Towers, 2018). This is a highly contestable position. Indeed, researchers in the wider field of ‘aggression’ have long differentiated between such ‘instrumental’ violence and violence that has been described variously as ‘expressive’, ‘reactive’ or ‘impulsive’ (Stuart and Stuart, 2008:231). While instrumental violence is goal-oriented and intended to elicit compliance, expressive violence is an emotional reaction to situational factors. It tends to be ‘brief and explosive’, and the perpetrator will often exhibit genuine remorse (Stuart and Stuart, 2008:231). Notwithstanding the fact that expressive violence likely exists on a continuum with instrumental violence, and that some acts may cause emotional trauma and intimidation even in the absence of serious physical injury (Stuart and Stuart, 2008), existing research points strongly to the existence of ‘situational’ acts of domestic violent crime (see Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2010); acts that occur outside of a wider context of coercion and control, and which may or may not result in harm to the recipient. While we are not claiming that population surveys measure solely or even primarily situational domestic violence (see Myhill, 2015), the fact that 43% of respondents reporting abuse to the CSEW said they didn’t report the matter to the police because it was ‘trivial or not worth reporting’ (Office for National Statistics, 2016:26) suggests that not all domestic violence caught by the survey is instrumental in nature as Walby and Towers (2018) suggest.

Typologies have been proposed to account for these different forms of violence (Stark, 2007; Johnson, 2008). These typologies distinguish primarily between coercive control and discrete acts of physical violence that occur outside a wider context of controlling behaviour. Walby and Towers (2018) dismiss such typologies, arguing they downgrade the salience of physical violence. We feel this position misrepresents the work of Stark, in particular. Stark’s typology, rather than being a binary distinction (as Walby and Towers suggest), includes a category of ‘partner assaults’: acts of violence that are outside of a wider pattern of controlling abuse, but are nonetheless intended to coerce when repeated over time (the ‘instrumental’ violence that Walby and Towers recognise). We agree with Walby and Towers’ (2018) suggestion that such typologies may be seen as fixed or stable, but that does not have to be the interpretation. In fact, it is perfectly feasible that, in some cases, what begins as situational violence may become coercive control if there is a shift in the balance of power in a relationship (following the birth of a child, for example).

*Counting crimes vs a course of conduct*

In this section we explore the reduction of coercive control to repetition, and the interaction between counting and understanding. Walby and Towers (2017) argue that since repetition of physical assaults is gendered each violent event should be counted in order that gendered disproportionality can be calculated. In this process, domestic violence is reduced to a series of crime incidents with frequency a dimension of measurement which is gendered. The alternative approach views some forms of violence against women as courses of conduct, which is less about counting specific violent acts and more about understanding processes of coercion and control which enable repetition. This notion is at the core of the concept of coercive control: to focus on a context of living in which everyday life is micro-managed, with the harm being the reduction of personhood and freedom. It is precisely the ongoing relational context, linked to existing gender inequality, which accounts for the deep impacts on women’s sense of self and their behaviour: they adapt to limit the abuse and its harms. An interesting parallel here is Fiona Vera-Gray’s (2018) work on sexual harassment: her depth qualitative research revealed that women have an embodied anticipation of intrusion when they are in public space, and that to prevent such encounters they undertake ‘safety work’, much of which serves to limit their freedom. She raises the critical question of whether women are required – and expected – to trade freedom for safety: an enquiry which surely also applies to domestic violence.

Walby and Towers’ (2018) argument against coercive control as a single course of conduct is made in several ways, including that in law abuse is treated as ‘repeated crimes’. The irony here is that this has not traditionally been the case in relation to the criminal justice response to domestic violence: it is generally the most recent incident that results in police intervention and charge. Most ‘crimes’ are neither charged nor prosecuted (Hester, 2006). The limits of violent crime as a framing have, therefore, been evident in domestic violence (and child sexual abuse) prosecutions for decades, with charges relating to specific events and the course of conduct rarely introduced evidentially or in sentencing. As an aside they recognise that there is an exception in the legal processing of stalking (Walby and Towers, 2018:8), but not that this established an important principle linked to feminist perspectives that many violence against women offences do not fit the model of assault which has been embedded in law for centuries: that it occurs randomly between two marginally connected men in the public sphere.

There is a long history of contestation about findings from sample surveys, both in terms of whether what is being measured is the same as the cases dealt with in practice, and the gender symmetrical nature of some prevalence estimates. Walby and Towers deal with the latter primarily through ‘uncapping’ frequency data to count repeated acts of physical violence, but side step the former through an invocation of a pattern of escalation. The positions of Stark (2007) and Johnson (2008) – that prevalence surveys count some situational acts of violence which are not part of ongoing coercive control – are dismissed through claiming that there is probably an underlying pattern of escalation in physical assaults. While this is undoubtedly the case in some instances, it is not as straightforward as suggested and the current CSEW does not generate data which allows patterns over time to be established. Neither would Walby and Towers’ proposed module, if it were placed in a survey without a longitudinal panel design. We have seen plenty of examples in practice where non-physical coercion has escalated, while physical assaults taper off. There are also cases where there are escalating/extreme levels of non-physical coercion and little or no physical violence. Furthermore, three studies of domestic homicides in the UK (Dobash and Dobash, 2015; Regan et al., 2007; Sharp-Jeffs and Kelly, 2016) all showed that there are a minority of cases, possibly up to a third, where there is no record or knowledge of physical assaults, but where there has been significant and ongoing controlling behaviour and ‘jealous surveillance’ (see also Stark and Hester, 2019). For us, the escalation thesis Walby and Towers propose represents an unwarranted extrapolation from survey data: CSEW data is simply not detailed or sophisticated enough to trace changes in patterns of abuse over time, nor can cross-sectional data show escalation in individual cases. How do we know what happened to that person the previous year, or the year after? While the theory of escalating physical violence allows the squaring of a circle, it does not have empirical support.

Walby and Towers (2018:5) are dismissive of efforts to measure coercive control, while failing to reference, let alone discuss, the ways in which this has actually been done. While not a prevalence survey, Sharp-Jeffs et al. (2018) developed a coercive control scale, linked to a Space for Action Scale, both of which have been tested statistically and shown to have internal validity. Walby and Towers refer to Myhill (2015) to show that current CSEW data is inadequate with respect to coercive control, but not the fact that this analysis was conceived as a challenge to improve measurement in this respect.

In sum, our reading of qualitative data from multiple projects, including ones we have worked on ourselves, suggests that there is no single pattern of domestic violence over time. To position escalation of physical violence as evidence of increasing danger, as Walby and Towers (2018) do in their critique of police risk assessment, runs the risk of cases where this not the case, but where victims have a heightened sense of danger, being downgraded. A number of domestic homicide reviews have concluded that women’s sense of heightened danger was not taken seriously by police and other agencies (Sharp-Jeffs and Kelly, 2016). For us, the fundamental question of what we are really measuring – any incident in any context, or an ongoing pattern of coercion which entraps and limits women and children’s freedom – is evaded across Walby and colleagues’ several recent publications. Counting is not the same as understanding.

*Violence and harm: The utility of ‘domestic violent crime’[[2]](#footnote-2)*

We have suggested that coercive control enables a more complete theorisation of women’s experiences of abuse from intimate partners. Walby and Towers’ concept of domestic violent crime may appeal in its apparent simplicity for measurement, but do claims made about the utility of crime categories stand up to scrutiny?

While we agree that accurate measurement of physical violence is a good thing, we do not support the argument that acts of physical violence that reach a criminal threshold equate by definition with either intention or harm. From an evidential standpoint, the *mens rea* of assault (the intention or knowledge of wrongdoing that constitutes an element of a crime) is that it ‘must be committed intentionally or *recklessly’* (Ormerod and Perry, 2017:255, our emphasis). An example observed frequently in police case files is where person A reports having been ‘pushed’ or ‘shoved’ by person B, but B justifies their actions by saying they were only attempting to get away from A, or remove them from their property. Technically a crime of assault has been committed, or a crime of assault occasioning actual bodily harm if A for example trips backwards off a step and sustains a wound of some kind. Yet B’s actions accord more with the notion of recklessness (they did not intend to cause harm to A, but they should reasonably have been aware of the possibility of A sustaining an injury if they were to fall as a result of being pushed). Indeed, in the CSEW a crime of ‘other wounding’ is recorded if injury is inflicted ‘unintentionally’[[3]](#footnote-3).

Similarly, the *actus reus* of assault (the action which is the constituent element of the crime) is simply ‘conduct which causes the victim to apprehend the imminent application of unlawful force upon him (sic)’ (Ormerod and Perry, 2017:253). What is often referred to as ‘common assault’ in English and Welsh law is actually two separate offences: assault and battery. Neither need result in physical injury – unlawful force may for example be applied to clothing as opposed to a person. The extent to which a non-injurious assault necessarily results in emotional harm is also open to question. In fact, Blackstone’s Criminal Practice gives the following example:

*If V [apprehends] the threat of imminent violence, it does not matter whether he is frightened by it. He may relish the opportunity to teach D a lesson, and yet still be regarded as the victim of D’s assault* (Ormerod and Perry, 2017: 254).

This example represents perfectly a primary perpetrator goading his victim over a period of time before she reacts, and her being presented as the aggressor should the police become involved. It is only possible to make sense of what has happened in such instances if specific acts are placed in the context of previous events, and the overall nature of the relationship.

So while there may be a ‘harm principle’ (see Ormerod and Laird, 2018:10) in the criminal law – crime is the violation of a moral code, which implies harm – in the absence of physical injury, the notion of ‘harm’ to the victim remains largely subjective. In relation to physical assaults, the only non-physical injury considered by the criminal law is diagnosable psychiatric injury. And although victims in the CSEW are asked about their ‘emotional reaction’ the response to this question has no bearing on the crime classification. The ‘fear, alarm and distress’ mentioned by Walby and Towers (2018:7) apply only, in relation to domestic violence, to the course of conduct offences of stalking and harassment and coercive control. And both police crime recording in England and Wales and surveys like the CSEW are *prima facie*: they rely on the interpretation of the person reporting. It follows that not all physical violence reported either to the police or to surveys necessarily results in harm to the victim. Qualitative research with perpetrators of domestic violence (see for example Dobash and Dobash, 2004), and even with men presenting as victims (Hester at al., 2017), provides numerous examples of men acknowledging their partner’s violent acts had little or no impact on their physical or emotional wellbeing. Aligning survey measurement to crime categories, then, while neat in theory, is not entirely straightforward in practice.

*Measuring violence to end violence?*

Walby and Towers’ (2017) paper makes the claim in its title that measuring violence is a route to ending violence. This goal, they argue, is to be achieved through a theory of change that links ‘identifiable actions in causal pathways’ (Walby and Towers, 2017:12), clearly intimating an intention to test theory using survey and criminal justice data. Aside from whether their proposed module could offer the depth of information to test explanations, this challenge begs the larger question of how data creates change. Within this and their subsequent 2018 paper the only causal pathway to be explored is women’s economic resources, one the authors claimed to find support for with their analysis of three years of CSEW data. There is no overall theory of change presented which measurement is linked to, nor other causal pathways identified.

One of Walby and colleagues’ core propositions is for consistency of data collection: ‘consistency is necessary for the purpose of comparison, which matters for testing theory and evaluation of policy’ (Walby and Towers, 2017:17). Adoption of their short module, it is claimed, will allow us to explore variations in locations, groups, policy regimes and social formations; how this is possible without deep contextual knowledge about policy and social formations, is not addressed. How can de-contextualised data enable contextual comparisons? Data – from surveys and other forms of research – suggest there is no unidirectional connection between economic resources and levels of domestic violence. For example, work in the global south has shown that increasing women’s economic resources did not lead to the expected reductions in violence. Indeed, some have argued that the opposite can be the case – increasing women’s economic resources through micro credit schemes increased levels of domestic violence (see for example Rahman, 1999). That interventions were changing the gender relations between women and men, and that men might resist this shift, including through the use of violence, was not recognised. We are not of course suggesting that increasing women’s economic independence is not a desirable goal, just that the relationship between economic resources and violence is not straightforward. Recent research on economic abuse, for example, has shown that when the opportunities for physical assault are reduced through separation, limiting women’s financial resources remains a strategy used by many abusive men: in this instance, fewer economic resources are associated with less physical violence (Sharp Jeffs et al, 2016). Violence, it appears, is a core and relatively independent pillar of gender orders, as Walby herself has argued (Walby, 1994).

It is also the case that the measures of economic resilience used by Walby and Towers are limited; they provide correlations, but whether these constitute causal pathways is debateable. Simply being employed, for example, is no guarantee of economic security as some abusers permit their partner to work, whilst appropriating all or most of their wages (see Sharp-Jeffs, 2017). Cross sectional survey data is insufficient to disentangle whether lower economic resources increases the rate of domestic violence or whether extricating oneself from abuse results in financial hardship, or if a combination of the two is taking place. Leaving abusive men often reduces financial resources (Walby, 1994), especially if abusive men use the economic as a form of power still available to them: by accruing debts in a woman’s name, failing to pay child maintenance, and other strategies (Sharp-Jeffs, 2017). The extent of economic abuse post separation cannot be taken into account by Walby and Towers (2018), since it does not fit their measurement framework, but it raises serious questions about the contention that women’s ‘economic resilience’ is the key to reducing domestic violence. In seeking to link the financial crisis of 2008 to rates of domestic violence over time an argument emerges about women’s economic resilience suggesting changes in domestic violence are caused by changes in the economic resources of victims. There is a danger here in invoking a concept steeped in neo-liberal thinking, that this is yet another, albeit undoubtedly unintended, route through which women can be responsibilised for their own safety (Coy and Kelly, forthcoming), which simultaneously makes perpetrators invisible.

**Concluding thoughts**

We have highlighted what we see as the limitations of the domestic violent crime framework for measurement. In aligning a measurement strategy to traditional crime categories in statute law, the domestic violent crime model inevitably excludes from consideration many of the tactics and behaviours survivors typically say they recognise as abuse. Crime categories, and survey measures derived from them, are always going to be ‘imposed’ to some degree on the complexity of women’s lived experiences of abuse. Qualitative research should be a touchstone in recognising that the gendered nature of domestic violence stretches beyond physical assault, and that harm is not just about physical injury. We also know that acts which are defined as ‘the same’ within criminal law may have a different impact on men and women due to gender hierarchies: both psychological and physical harms are likely to be worse for women. The notion, appealing in theory, that all acts of violence that meet the threshold of a crime necessarily involve intent on behalf of the perpetrator and harm to the victim does not stand up to close examination. While physical injury is covered by the criminal law, psychological and emotional harm and fear are not adequately represented. Neither have these harms, or the harms survivors suggest are the most salient to them, such as narrowed ‘space for action’, been operationalised in *national* population surveys. We have argued that operationalising the concept of coercive control will provide a measurement framework true to, and born out of, the lived experiences of victim-survivors.

We have also highlighted the recent shift in the position of Walby in particular relating to several aspects of the debate on measurement. Whilst not suggesting that academics should maintain their positions on theoretical or empirical issues, Walby’s apparent shift away from notions of power and control towards a position premised almost entirely on counting discrete acts of violence has multiple implications. While we genuinely appreciate and value the notion of quantitative measurement frameworks, comparable across time and jurisdiction, we are not convinced the potential benefits of more accurate frequency counts outweigh what is being conceded.

Firstly, there is the issue, in the context of the CSEW, of which source of data is afforded primacy: the main survey crime count, or the self-completion module. When the self-completion modules on interpersonal violence were introduced to the survey, it was in recognition that women underreported significantly their experiences of abuse to the ‘main’ part of the survey. Walby, in conjunction with the first author, consolidated self-completion modules on domestic violence, sexual assault and stalking to form a single module able to present a more accurate representation of these forms of intimate violence, both individually and in combination. Walby and Allen (2004) showed that disclosure to the 2001 self-completion module was considerably higher than to the main survey, producing prevalence estimates that were five times greater. This greater disclosure is most likely the result of a greater sense of confidentiality derived from the anonymous nature of the self-completion methodology. Walby (2005) considered the most important element of survey methodology to be facilitating disclosure though confidentiality.

Walby’s more recent stated preference for the CSEW main survey (see Walby and Towers, 2017) appears driven solely by the fact that victims reporting crimes to the main survey are asked how many discrete incidents they have experienced. While we regard Walby et al.’s innovative (2016) analysis of ‘uncapped’ data from the main CSEW crime count as an extremely important contribution to this field, revealing as it did a hitherto undocumented increase in the incidence of physical assaults against women, we question whether this approach is a transferable or sustainable way forward if the aim is to create alignment of measurement frameworks across jurisdictions. For the crime count in the main part of the CSEW, face-to-face interviewers help victims disentangle different episodes of abuse and make estimations of ‘repeat’ incidents. There follows an in-depth, manual coding process to ensure that descriptions of incidents are allocated the correct crime classification. This process is beyond the scope of most surveys, and it remains to be seen how long it is feasible for the CSEW with the general trend for surveys being towards online administration. Frequency counts are less feasible in the context of the current CSEW self-completion module. To ask victims to estimate the frequency of every abusive behaviour would add an unmanageable number of questions to the survey, while victims have been shown to be much less able to estimate accurately the frequency of specific behaviours without the help of an interviewer[[4]](#footnote-4).

The issue of victims being unable to recall accurately discrete incidents of abuse has long been recognised in relation to police recorded crime data in England and Wales. Walby and colleagues have suggested (Walby, 2005; Walby and Towers, 2018) that including coercive control in measurement frameworks would obscure the incidence of violent crime, by rolling many incidents into a single course of conduct. That argument does not stand up to scrutiny. The Home Office Counting Rules for Recorded Crime[[5]](#footnote-5) specify a ‘finished incident rule’ precisely in recognition that it may not be possible for victims to recall accurately multiple victimisations, should they not report each incident contemporaneously. Thus, if a victim of domestic violence calls the police for the first time to report weeks, months or even years of physical abuse (which is not an unusual scenario, see Kelly, 1999) then the police would, under the finished incident rule, record one crime of assault. Any subsequent report would be counted as a separate crime. The introduction of coercive control as a crime category has not changed this scenario: one crime of coercive control would be recorded, followed by another crime of coercive control, physical assault or other appropriate crime should there be a subsequent report. The only change is with the *proportion* of crime classified as ‘violence with injury’, following the Home Office’s decision to classify coercive control under ‘violence without injury’. We would suggest, bearing in mind the inevitability of some form of emotional or psychological injury following coercive control, that classifying coercive control as violence with injury would be preferable to marginalising or ignoring it.

We support the aim of capturing the frequency of physical violence experienced by victims of domestic abuse. But we believe that endeavour should not be at the expense of capturing the prevalence of abuse, and especially the non-violent forms of coercion and control that are central to what survivors describe as their experience of abuse. These behaviours are, by their continuous nature, less possible to conceptualise as discrete acts and to quantify. We also believe that the type of counting advocated by Walby and colleagues is compatible with the concept of coercive control. The two approaches can be complementary, and Walby herself has suggested previously that ‘it is important to include … both the number of incidents as well as the prevalence rate, not just one or the other, if the extent of violence against women is to be adequately represented’ (Walby, 2005:195). Acts of physical violence can be counted, and situated within or without non-violent coercion and control. In that way, sub-types of abuse can be recognised, as with analysis of data from the Canadian General Social Survey (Ansara and Hindin, 2010): coercive control that includes physical violence, coercive control where physical violence is not prominent, and so on. On its own, and without embracing the crime category of coercive control that now exists in England and Wales, the domestic violent crime model excludes much of the abusive behaviour that women suffer. It also fails to situate physically violent acts in context, meaning it illuminates the gendered nature of abuse in some respects, but obscures it in others. Possible common ground, and a way forward for the development of measurement in this field, is a focus on measures of impact and harm, and in particular attempting to capture the emotional and psychological harm that is inadequately captured by traditional crime categories (see also Stark and Hester, 2019).

We conclude by returning to the issue of the salience of qualitative research in this field of inquiry. Raynor (2018:60), reflecting on the ‘what works’ paradigm in the field of probation, describes social scientific inquiry as a ‘three legged creature’. While measurement and comparison may be the ultimate goals of policy-oriented research and evaluation, they must be underpinned by (qualitative) *understanding* of ‘the aims of social actors … and the meanings they attach to what they do and to what happens to them’. In the field of domestic violence, that understanding has been established through a proud tradition of feminist-activist research involving survivors’ in-depth accounts of their lives and abuse histories. As mixed-method researchers, we are not underestimating the role that quantitative data has to play in illuminating the extent and nature of violence against women, but we are concerned about a trend towards quantitative analyses that uses conceptualisations and sources of data that bear little resemblance to women’s lived experiences.

In summary, while we support wholeheartedly the accurate measurement of the type and frequency of physical violence, we believe measuring non-violent forms of coercion is fundamental to understanding the gendered nature of abuse. By ignoring the gender hierarchies within which physical violence occurs, the domestic violent crime model will inevitably count primary perpetrators as victims. It tells us little about violence in conjunction with non-violent coercion, and nothing about people who suffer only non-violent coercion but show the same levels of fear and use the same coping strategies as those who also experience physical violence (Crossman et al., 2016). Proponents of the model posit currently only one explanatory theory, based on the economic resilience of victims. If this is the link between data and explanation – that only those variables which show high correlations with violence in surveys are to be theorised – we are moving very far away from the extensive body of research in which women discuss what they experience as harmful and why. Our measurement frameworks must be true to lived experiences, or we risk distorting those experiences and the policy and practice that seeks to help women to live free from abuse.

**References**

Ansara D and Hindin M (2010) Exploring gender differences in the patterns of intimate partner violence in Canada: A latent class approach. *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health* 64(10): 849-854.

Connell R (2009) *Gender*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Coy M and Kelly L (forthcoming) The responsibilisation of women who experience domestic violence: a case study from England and Wales.

Crossman K, Hardesty J and Raffaelli M (2016) “He could scare me without laying a hand on me”: Mothers’ experiences of nonviolent coercive control during marriage and after separation. *Violence Against Women* 22(4): 454-473.

Dobash R and Dobash R (1979) *Violence against wives*. New York: The Free Press.

Dobash R and Dobash R (2004) Women’s violence to men in intimate relationships: Working on a puzzle. *British Journal of Criminology* 44(3): 324-349.

Dobash R and Dobash R (2015) *When men murder women*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Goard C and Tutty L (eds) (2002) [*Reclaiming Self*](https://fernwoodpublishing.ca/book/reclaiming-self)*: Issues and Resources for Women Abused by Intimate Partners*. Calgary: Fernwood Publishing.

Hester M (2006) Making it through the criminal justice system: attrition and domestic violence. *Social Policy and Society* 5(1): 79-90.

Hester M, Jones C, Williamson E, Fahmy E and Feder G (2017) Is it coercive controlling violence? A cross-sectional domestic violence and abuse survey of men attending general practice in England. *Psychology of Violence* DOI: 10.1037/vio0000107.

Johnson M (2008) *A typology of domestic violence: Intimate terrorism, violent resistance, and situational couple violence*. Boston: Northeastern University Press.

Kelly L (1987) *Surviving sexual violence*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Kelly L (1999) *Domestic violence matters*. London: Home Office.

Kelly L, Sharp N and Klein R (2014) *Finding the Costs of Freedom: How women and children rebuild their lives after domestic violence*. London: Solace Women’s Aid/CWASU.

Kelly L and Westmarland N (2016) [Naming and defining 'domestic violence': Lessons from research with violent men](https://idp.springer.com/authorize/casa?redirect_uri=https://link.springer.com/article/10.1057/fr.2015.52&casa_token=pOM5ZeAULRwAAAAA:ePCwyxCp1ncN5Q2kKF1W9uIQX3MdbgdHAZN3NXg1RD7zZo2IAx0O8MuRZN3KJ5lFfQGFxm3rMuOrylXL). *Feminist Review* 112(1): 113-127.

Kirkwood C (1993) *Leaving abusive partners: From the scars of survival to the wisdom for change*. London: Sage.

Langhinrichsen-Rohling J (2010) Controversies involving gender and intimate partner violence in the United States. *Sex Roles* 62(3-4): 179-193.

Lundgren E (1998) The hand that strikes and comforts: Gender construction and the tension between body and symbol. In: Dobash R and Dobash R (eds) *Rethinking Violence Against Women*, London: Sage, pp. 169-198.

McGlynn C and Munro V (2010) *Rethinking Rape Law: International and comparative perspectives*. London: Routledge.

Merry S (2016) *The seductions of quantification: Measuring human rights, gender violence, and sex trafficking*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Morris A (2009) Gendered dynamics of abuse and violence in families: Considering the abusive household gender regime. *Child Abuse Review* 18(6): 414-427.

Myhill A (2015) Measuring coercive control: What can we learn from national population surveys? *Violence Against Women* 21(3): 355-375.

Myhill A (2017) Measuring domestic violence: Context is everything. *Journal of Gender-based Violence* 1(1): 33-44.

Office for National Statistics (2016) *Compendium: Intimate personal violence and partner abuse*. Report, ONS, UK, February.

Okun L (1986) *Woman Abuse: Facts replacing myths*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Ormerod D and Perry D (eds) (2017) *Blackstone’s Criminal Practice 2018*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ormerod D and Laird K (2018) *Smith, Hogan and Ormerod’s criminal law*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Pence E and Paymar M (1993) *Education groups for men who batter*. New York: Springer.

Rahman A (1999) Micro-credit initiatives for equitable and sustainable development: Who pays? *World Development* 27 (1): 67-8.

Raynor P (2018) From ‘nothing works’ to ‘post-truth’: The rise and fall of evidence in British probation. *European Journal of Probation* 10(1): 59-75.

Regan L, Kelly L, Morris A and Dibb R (2007) *‘If only we’d known’: An exploratory study of seven intimate partner homicides in Engleshire*. London: London Metropolitan University Child and Woman Abuse Studies Unit.

Schechter S (1982) *Women and male violence: The visions and struggles of the battered women’s movement*. Boston, MA: South End Press.

Sharp-Jeffs N (2017) *Into plain sight: How economic abuse is reflected in successful prosecutions of controlling or coercive behaviour*. London: Surviving Economic Abuse.

Sharp-Jeffs N and Kelly L (2016) *Domestic Homicide Review (DHR): Case analysis*. London: Standing Together/London Metropolitan University.

Sharp-Jeffs N, Kelly L and Klein R (2018) Long journeys toward freedom: The relationship between coercive control and space for action – Measurement and emerging evidence. *Violence Against Women* 24(2): 163-185.

Stark E (2007) *Coercive control: How men entrap women in personal life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Stark E (2017) Coercive control as a framework for responding to male partner abuse in the UK: Opportunities and challenges. In: Lombard J (ed) *The Routledge Handbook of Gender and Violence*. Abingdon, Oxford: Routledge, pp. 15-27.

Stark E and Hester M (2019) Coercive control: Update and review. *Violence Against Women* 25(1): 81–104.

Stuart G and Stuart R (2008) Expressive violence. In: Renzetti C and Edleson J (eds) *The Encyclopedia of Interpersonal Violence*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage, pp. 231-232.

Vera-Gray F (2018) *The right amount of panic: How women trade freedom for safety in public*. Bristol: Policy Press.

Walby S (1994) *Theorizing patriarchy*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Walby S (2005) Improving the statistics on violence against women. *Statistical Journal of the United Nations* 22(3-4): 193-216.

Walby S and Allen J (2004) *Domestic violence, sexual assault and stalking: Findings from the British Crime Survey*. London: Home Office.

Walby S, Towers J and Francis B (2016) Is violent crime increasing or decreasing? A new methodology to measure repeat attacks making visible the significance of gender and domestic relations. *British Journal of Criminology* 56(1): 1203-1234.

Walby S, Towers J … Strid S (2017) *The concept and measurement of violence against women and men*. Bristol: Policy Press.

Walby S and Towers J (2017) Measuring violence to end violence: Mainstreaming gender. *Journal of Gender-Based Violence* 1(1): 11-31.

Walby S and Towers J (2018) Untangling the concept of coercive control: Theorizing domestic violent crime. *Criminology and Criminal Justice* DOI: 10.1177/1748895817743541.

1. The power and control framing was documented by Domestic Abuse Intervention Programs in Duluth, Minnesota (Pence and Paymar, 1993). The ‘Duluth model’ has indisputably been a world travelling concept influencing policy and practice and informing professional training in countless countries. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. We are grateful to Professor Vanessa Bettinson of De Montfort University for advice relating to this section. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The first author has direct experience of CSEW coding. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Based on discussions held at the ONS Domestic Abuse Statistics Steering Group, of which the first author is a member. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/counting-rules-for-recorded-crime> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)