

**PRELIMINARY DISCUSSION DOCUMENT**

**MEASURING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN:  
RECENT DEVELOPMENTS**

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## INTRODUCTION

In *The Seductions of Quantification* (2016, ch. 3-4), Sally Engle Merry points to a global momentum to increase the measurement of violence against women. Her analysis in these chapters, focusing primarily on the United Nations (UN) and European Union (EU), provides a fine-grained study of the political and social dynamics that lie below the surface of seemingly ‘neutral’ developments to measure, through surveys, indicators and reports, violence against women. Merry tracks the people, meetings, and documents that circulated as part of a UN effort to develop more statistical data on violence against women, highlighting the power relations that structured who became influential in determining what to measure, and how the processes of conducting measurements unfolded (and where). Merry’s analysis demonstrates that measurement processes are not separate from the things they seek to track; what is measured as violence against women may overtime constitute accepted knowledge about what *is* violence against women. This seemingly simple observation has important implications for those working in the violence against women field.

The increased attention on producing violence against women data is, without a doubt, profoundly important and much-needed. What’s more, the UN initiatives Merry describes reveal the positive impacts individual feminists had in developing a robust approach to measuring violence against women in some of those international developments. But Merry’s analysis also points to the importance of ‘technical’ processes, which often disassemble feminist-inspired definitions of violence against women into constituent elements (as indicators, or components of a survey), and which may then travel into policy arenas in ways that normalize a stripped-down, decontextualized approach to violence against women.

In this paper, and following Merry's lead, we provide an overview first, of some aspects of this global momentum around measuring violence against women, and particularly the turn to numeric forms of measure, as offering a possible counter-point to how violence against women discussions are unfolding now in Canada; second, we then briefly tease out two dynamics taking shape around the global developments on the violence against women indicators Merry discusses: trends in the de-gendering of violence against women data-gathering, and the apparent mobility of the UN's violence against women indicators. The final section returns to the Canadian context to open up some questions for discussion.

## **GLOBAL CONTEXTS AND THE TURN TO MEASURING**

The growing demand in some global forums for more data on violence against women is likely the result of several distinct developments. Trends in forms of governance (such as 'results based management') that rely on self-monitoring and reporting, have elevated the expectation for, and the convictions about the benefits of, ongoing gathering and reporting of (numeric) data. This trend to what some refer to as 'audit society' (Power 1997) overlaps with a demand by some feminist activists that state governments and international actors monitor and produce gender-disaggregated statistics. In the area of violence against women, this has resulted in some international agreements, such as the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW, General Recommendation No. 19), requiring states to gather data on violence against women as part of their international obligations. General Recommendation 19 was itself the result of feminist activism in the 1980s and 1990s to strengthen international commitments on women's rights and violence against women in forums such as the Beijing Conference on Women (1994), the Vienna Conference on Human Rights (1993), and the Cairo Conference on

Population and Development (1993). More recently, the heightened (some might say hyper) attention to wartime sexual violence also has had an effect, with increased requirements, such as through the UN Security Council, to track sexual violence rates and patterns (UN Strategic Results Framework on Women, Peace and Security: 2011-2020 (UN Women 2011)).

Against this backdrop, the UN Statistical Commission began the process to generate more data on violence against women and the conditions within which more data *could* (and hopefully would) be produced by individual states. The focus was on developing standardized measurement tools; an internationally agreed-upon set of indicators on violence against women, multi-country surveys, and survey guidelines for use by state governments globally. This process aligned with, and in some cases led to the development of, new multi-country surveys on violence against women.

### **Surveys**

A number of surveys on violence against women were developed in the mid-to-late 2000s, almost all of them focusing on intimate partner violence with an emphasis on sexual and physical violence. Some of these surveys were designed for a specific region (i.e. Europe), but others were developed with an eye to providing templates for subsequent data collection globally. Table 1.0 provides a summary of some prominent multi-country violence against women surveys.

**Table 1.0: Multi-country Surveys on Violence against Women**

Publisher	Name of Survey	Countries Surveyed	Summary
World Health Organization (WHO)	<i>WHO Multi-country Study on Women's Health and Domestic Violence against Women</i> (2005)	Bangladesh, Brazil, Ethiopia, Japan, Namibia, Peru, Samoa, Serbia and Montenegro, Thailand, and United Republic of Tanzania	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Focused on violence against women by both <b>past and current male intimate partners, including physical and sexual violence, emotional abuse, and controlling behaviours</b> by current partners or ex-partners. <b>Women's attitudes toward violence against women</b> were also measured.</li> <li>- Aimed to connect a range of <b>health outcomes</b> to women's experiences of violence, identify the <b>prevalence of violence against women</b>, and document <b>strategies and services</b> women can use to deal with intimate partner violence.</li> <li>- Data on the <b>age, partnership status, and educational characteristics</b> of respondents was included. All respondents were <b>women</b>.</li> <li>- Data from over <b>24 000 women</b> was collected using a household survey. The <b>standard methodology allowed for comparison of results</b> across the 10 countries represented in the study. The study found that there was <b>great variation in the prevalence and patterns of violence against women</b> across countries and contexts (Garcia-Moreno et al 2005).</li> </ul>
European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA)	<p><i>Violence against Women: An EU-Wide Survey*</i> (Piloted in 2010, carried out in 2011-2012, and results published in 2014.)</p> <p><i>*Although titled 'Violence against women', the FRA website refers to it as 'gender-based violence' survey.</i></p>	Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Germany, Denmark, Estonia, Greece, Spain, Finland, France, Croatia, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Latvia, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Sweden, Slovenia, Slovakia, United Kingdom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>42 000 women</b> were interviewed across the <b>28 EU member states</b>.</li> <li>- Provided <b>both quantitative and qualitative data</b> on the <b>prevalence and consequences of physical and sexual violence, psychological partner violence, stalking, sexual harassment, violence in childhood, fear of victimisation, and attitudes and awareness of violence against women</b>.</li> <li>- Also measured the <b>emotional impacts of violence against women</b> (i.e. percentage of women who have avoided certain situations and locations for fear of physical or sexual assault).</li> <li>- Data was <b>disaggregated</b> according to <b>sex</b> (male or female), <b>sexual orientation, disability, health, and migrant backgrounds</b> (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2014).</li> </ul>
UN Statistics Division	<i>Guidelines for Producing Statistics on Violence against Women</i> (2014)	NA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Provides a <b>guideline</b> for countries to conduct their own surveys and data collection of violence against women; a <b>standardized methodology</b> allows for <b>comparison of data across countries</b>.</li> <li>- Provides information on collecting data on the <b>prevalence and severity of physical violence and sexual violence by intimate partners and other relations</b>, across the <b>lifetime</b> and within the <b>last 12 months</b>. Also provides guidelines on measuring the rate of <b>psychological violence and economic violence</b> against women in the <b>past 12 months</b> by an <b>intimate partner</b>, and the rate of <b>female genital mutilation</b>.</li> <li>- The Guidelines assert that the <b>two most important personal characteristics</b> to ascertain from respondents is their <b>age and marital/relationships status</b>. Other variables like ethnicity,</li> </ul>

			language, economic status can be included depending on the context and objective of the study (UN Statistics Division 2014).
European Institute for Crime Prevention and Control (HEUNI)	<i>International Violence against Women Survey (IVAWS)</i> (2008)	Australia, Costa Rica, Czech Republic, Denmark, Greece, Hong Kong, Italy, Mozambique, the Philippines, Poland, Switzerland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Measured men's violence against women, especially <b>domestic violence</b> and <b>sexual assault</b>, to assess levels of <b>victimization of women</b> across countries, and to <b>measure how and when women sought help from criminal justice systems</b>.</li> <li>- Was conceived as a <b>solution to the problem of under-reporting of sexual and domestic violence</b> on the International Crime Victimization Survey.</li> <li>- <b>53 000 women</b> were interviewed. Data on <b>relationship status</b> and <b>income</b> was collected; optional questions could be asked on respondent's ethnic background, nationality, and religion.</li> <li>- While all countries were invited to participate, <b>countries had to raise their own funds</b> to conduct the survey. Many countries could not afford to do so (Johnson, Ollus, and Nevala 2008).</li> </ul>
UN Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE)	<i>Survey Module for Measuring Violence against Women</i> (2011)	Module has been tested in Armenia, Georgia, Mexico, the Republic of Moldova, and South Africa	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Developed to enable countries to collect information required to measure the <b>prevalence of physical, sexual, and intimate partner violence</b>.</li> <li>- The survey guidelines emphasize the need to <b>protect the safety and privacy of respondents</b>.</li> <li>- Measures <b>physical acts of violence</b>, as well as <b>social isolation, controlling behaviours, economic abuse, and emotional abuse</b>.</li> <li>- Collects data on <b>marriage/relationship status</b>; notes that other socio-demographic data should be collected but does not provide detailed guidelines on obtaining such information (UN Economic Commission for Europe 2013).</li> </ul>
USAID and ICF International	<i>The Demographic and Health Surveys</i> (Optional questions on domestic violence and female genital cutting added in 2005. Ongoing every 5 years.)	25 countries for domestic violence; 23 countries for female genital cutting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Includes <b>two optional modules on domestic violence and female genital cutting</b>, developed between 2005 and 2008.</li> <li>- The module on domestic violence covers <b>physical and sexual violence, emotional abuse, and controlling behaviours</b>. The focus is on <b>intimate partner violence</b>.</li> <li>- Collects data on <b>marriage/relationship status</b>; other identity markers are not measured.</li> <li>- The module on female genital cutting asks whether or not the respondent or her daughters have been circumcised, and if so, who did the circumcision and details of the operation (Demographic and Health Surveys Program 2016; Merry 2016).</li> </ul>
UNICEF	<i>The Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS)</i>  (Optional module on violence against women included in 2005; moved to the main survey along with female genital cutting in 2009. Ongoing every 5 years.)	More than 100 countries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Focuses on <b>attitudes toward domestic violence and female genital cutting</b>.</li> <li>- Questions on female genital cutting ask whether or not the respondent or her daughters has been circumcised, and if so, who did the circumcision, how old were they at the time of circumcision, and details of the operation.</li> <li>- The section on attitudes toward domestic violence is very <b>brief</b>. It asks the respondent <b>whether or not a husband is justified in hitting or beating his wife in six situations</b> (i.e. if she goes out without telling him, if she refuses to have sex with him, if she burns the food). Respondents can answer yes, no, or do not know.</li> <li>- Given the focus on domestic violence, the survey only measures attitudes towards <b>interpersonal and intimate partner violence against women</b> (Merry 2016; UNICEF 2016).</li> </ul>

Surveys dedicated to the collection of data on violence against women are undoubtedly important developments; data on violence against women has much to contribute to global knowledge and as a basis for more effective responses to violence against women. However, there are limitations to these surveys. First, the focus is on intimate partner violence and sexual assault. Structural violence against women (such as state violence or the social acceptance of violence) is not measured. Second, the growing emphasis on collecting standardized data across countries means that these surveys produce definitions, understandings, and methodologies that can be used around the world. Such transferability strips away context, specificity, and those aspects of violence against women that are difficult to quantify or don't easily lend themselves to cross-national comparison. For instance, even when focusing on interpersonal violence, the complexity of intimate relationships cannot be captured fully through counting and measurement – nor is it likely that these complexities manifest in comparable ways across contexts (Merry 2016; 62-63). Similarly, the definitions and indicators used in these surveys often neglect the axes of difference which shape women's lives, and their experiences of violence against women. Race, sexuality, disability, class, and so on, are often not discussed explicitly given that they are difficult to quantify and difficult to compare across nations and cultures. Third, women and men are identified in these surveys largely according to sex (male or female), and violence is positioned as unfolding in the context of relationships between two people. But women and men in this frame are not necessarily understood as gendered subjects, whose relationship and violence can unfold over time in varying conditions of intimacy, insecurity, fear, and love that are structured within a larger, gendered context. When violence against women is examined through a gendered lens, the ways in which violence both produces and is a consequence of gendered social relations deepens understanding of the forms and effects of violence. When sex

is the primary lens, the link between violence against women and gendered social relations is rendered invisible; Holly Johnson calls this the ‘degendering’ of violence (2015). Finally, Table 1.0 also illustrates how the call for increased data collection hinges on the capacity of data institutions. These surveys were designed, financed, and carried out by international institutions; the cost and burden of conducting national surveys is often beyond the administrative capacity of some countries.

Importantly, these limitations, in and of themselves, are not the foci of our critique; surveys and data collection are always hampered by limitations. Instead, the issue at hand is that these limitations all contribute to the processes through which the thing that is measured comes to be defined through the act of measuring. In this case, this surge in surveys on violence against women all focus primarily on physical and sexual violence between intimate partners. While this data is important, it produces measures that treat women as a homogenized group, vulnerable to particular violence from men, in which the complex gendered reality of violence is difficult to materialize.

## **Indicators**

Indicators are statistical measures that are used to consolidate complex data into a simple number, often with the intent of facilitating ranking (Merry 2011, S86). Indicators on violence against women act as another mechanism through which the complex forms and experiences of gendered violence are reduced to a format that can be measured – often leading to the perception that this simplified format constitutes the realities of violence against women.

Arguably, the most significant set of indicators related to violence against women are the core indicators on violence against women developed by a special UN committee - the Friends of



the Chair – within the Statistical Commission. The Committee was established in 2008 to develop indicators of violence against women that were ‘universally valid’ (Merry 2016, 58-61). The list was approved in 2011, and is reproduced in Table 2.0.

This list of indicators, resonant with the surveys discussed above, defines violence against women narrowly, focusing on physical and sexual violence by intimate and non-intimate partners, female genital cutting, and emotional and economic violence (Merry 2016, 62). It ignores structural and systemic forms of violence, including state violence by military, violence against men, sexual harassment, female feticide, and more, while simultaneously stripping away the complexities prevalent in intimate and non-intimate relationships (Merry 2016, 62).

<b>Table 2.0: Core Indicators of the Friends of the Chair of the Statistical Commission on indicators of Violence against Women</b>	
i.	Total and age specific rate of women subjected to <b>physical violence</b> in the last <b>12 months</b> by <b>severity of violence, relationship to the perpetrator and frequency</b>
ii.	Total and age specific rate of women subjected to <b>physical violence</b> during <b>lifetime</b> by <b>severity of violence, relationship to the perpetrator and frequency</b>
iii.	Total and age specific rate of women subjected to <b>sexual violence</b> in the last <b>12 months</b> by <b>severity of violence, relationship to the perpetrator and frequency</b>
iv.	Total and age specific rate of women subjected to <b>sexual violence</b> during <b>lifetime</b> by <b>severity of violence, relationship to the perpetrator and frequency</b>
v.	Total and age specific rate of <b>ever-partnered women</b> subjected to <b>sexual and/or physical violence</b> by current or former <b>intimate partner</b> in the last <b>12 months</b> by frequency
vi.	Total and age specific rate of <b>ever-partnered women</b> subjected to <b>sexual and/or physical violence</b> by current or former <b>intimate partner</b> during <b>lifetime</b> by frequency
vii.	Total and age specific rate of women subjected to <b>psychological violence</b> in the past <b>12 months</b> by the <b>intimate</b> partner
viii.	Total and age specific rate of women subjected to <b>economic violence</b> in the past <b>12 months</b> by the <b>intimate</b> partner
ix.	Total and age specific rate of women subjected to <b>female genital mutilation</b> .
Source: UN 2010, 18-19.	

Indicators developed in one policy context can travel to another. The indicators above, developed in the context of the UN General Assembly’s push towards measuring violence against women, are now also appearing as measures used in different policy contexts. For example, two of the indicators are now being used as part of the UN’s Sustainable Development

Goals (which provide a roadmap of international development funding and programming priorities for the next 14 years), as a way to measure Sustainable Development Goal 5.2: the elimination of all forms of violence against women and girls in both the private and public sphere (UN General Assembly 2015, 18). The two indicators used are:

- a. Proportion of ever-partnered women and girls aged 15 years and older subjected to **physical, sexual or psychological violence by a current or former intimate partner**, in the last **12 months**, by form of violence and by age group and;
- b. Proportion of women and girls aged 15 years and older subjected to **sexual violence by persons other than an intimate partner**, in the last **12 months**, by age group and place of occurrence. (UN Statistical Commission 2016)

Some of the indicators have also traveled into gender equality indices. These indices quantify gender inequality in different national contexts, often with the goal of comparing, contrasting, and ranking countries and their ‘level’ of gender inequality. Violence against women has not generally been included in this indices, itself an alarming gap. However, this seems to be changing. The European Institute for Gender Equality’s Gender Equality Index now includes a measure on violence against women. While violence against women was identified as an important issue related to gender equality in the first Gender Equality Index report in 2013, a lack of harmonized data at the EU level meant that violence against women was not actually measured, that is, until the EU-Wide Survey on violence against women (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2014; see Table 1.0) provided the missing data. This data was used to calculate a preliminary measure of violence against women for the most recent report (European Institute for Gender Equality 2015). The Gender Equality Index uses 6 measurements of violence against women which, once again, focus on physical and sexual violence by an intimate partner:

- a. The percentage of women who experienced **physical violence by a partner** since the age of 15;

- b. The percentage of women who experienced **sexual violence by a partner** since the age of 15;
- c. The percentage of women who experienced **psychological violence by a partner** since the age of 15;
- d. The percentage of women who experienced **physical violence by a partner** in the **12 months** prior to data collection;
- e. The percentage of women who experienced **sexual violence by a partner** in the **12 months** prior to data collection and;
- f. The percentage of women who experienced **sexual violence by a non-partner** since the age of 15. (European Institute for Gender Equality 2016)

As indicators circulate and are picked up in various contexts, they are normalized and equated with that which they measure. The gap between a broad definition of violence against women as including, for example, structural forms of violence, and indicators of violence against women that focus primarily on interpersonal physical and sexual violence, becomes further obfuscated as indicators travel.

Not only has indicator travel influenced these two developments, but they themselves will create demands for violence against women data, but, once again, prioritizing the data needed on physical and sexual interpersonal violence. For instance, the UN Population Fund and the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade launched a joint initiative, called kNOwVAWdata Project, on August 24, 2016, in response to the growing demand for reliable and comparable data on violence against women, especially given the adoption by Member States of the Sustainable Development Goals (UN Population Fund 2016). This initiative aims to provide training and capacity building for measuring international indicators on violence against women, particularly those put forth by Target 5.2, for countries in Asia and the Pacific (UN Population Fund 2016).

## **Other Data**

The demand for more data on violence against women is leading to the production of other kinds of reports and information beyond the surveys, indicators, and standardizing protocols discussed above. For example, the UN has established the Global Database on Violence against Women to “encourage exchange on initiatives and ideas, and the transfer of promising practices” (UN 2009) on eliminating violence against women. It is comprised of information gleaned from a questionnaire sent to state governments on the institutional, legal, legislative frameworks, and other mechanisms that have been implemented to address violence against women (UN Women 2012). UN human rights bodies (such as CEDAW) also require state reports on a range of issues relating to violence against women (Liebowitz and Zwingle 2014), and the recently adopted Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (known as the ‘Istanbul Convention’) calls for all Member States to collect and report on quantitative and qualitative data on a variety of issues related to violence against women, with a particular focus on state action in combating the phenomenon. This treaty also calls on governments to produce disaggregated statistical data at regular intervals on all forms of violence against women (Council of Europe 2011, 10, article 11). The first set of completed reports is due in September of 2016 (Council of Europe 2016).

These and related reporting requirements can have positive impacts on measuring violence against women, increasing attention and spending on efforts to monitor and combat violence. Because of our space constraints here, our discussion is limited to flagging these as important promising developments, but with some caveats. First, these reports, while offering space for more contextual information, also prioritize reporting on the dimensions of violence against women emphasized in the surveys and indicators mapped above. Second, in a climate

where numeric forms of measurement (and accountability measures like indicators) are seen as the ‘gold standard,’ these other kinds of data may be accorded less value. Third, when developed in a human rights context, these reports prioritize information on state forms of compliance; institutions, laws, policies, and the like. These forms of state ‘compliance’ can then become proxy measures on violence against women but which actually may say very little about the substantive impacts of state institutions in combating violence against women.

## **DISCUSSION**

The Canadian policy climate on addressing violence against women appears to be in a state of (hopeful) change. A number of recent developments have succeeded in placing violence against women more centrally on the public policy agenda. The devastating phenomenon of Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women, for example, has drawn attention to pervasive and complex forms of violence against First Nations, Métis, and Inuit women and girls (as well as the tenacious grip of ‘criminal justice’ framing of this issue), leading to the establishment of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. The trial of former CBC Radio host Jian Ghomeshi for multiple counts of sexual violence, while dismaying in its result, crystallized for many the shocking inadequacies of the legal system in addressing sexual violence, an issue that continues to grab headlines with the Canadian Judicial Council review of Federal Court judge, Robin Camp, for his belittling of an Indigenous woman sexual violence complainant. The establishment of the Federal Government’s Advisory Council and the on-going pan-Canadian consultations to help shape the Federal Strategy against gender-based violence is also promising.

While each of these developments raises, in different ways, issues relating to data on violence against women (the lack and misrepresentation of data; the question of who collects it, and how), at the moment, Canadian measurements of violence against women are fragmented. Statistics Canada's celebrated innovations in violence against women surveys in the early 1990s have lost considerable ground and remain inadequate (Johnson 2015), while other recent developments, such as new policy attention to university and college campus sexual violence is generating its own momentum. The Government of Ontario (Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities Act, s. 17(7)), for example, now requires higher education institutions to regularly collect and report on sexual violence data which may give rise to a productive conversation about the different types and needs for measurements of violence against women.

### **Questions for discussion**

1. To what extent, if at all, do you share concerns about the narrowing of measures on violence against women to physical and sexual violence? Do you see similar problems in the areas in which you work?
2. What are the challenges you see in measuring, collecting and/or presenting data on violence against women within the community or sector in which you work? In what ways are you seeing resistance or transgression in response to top-down requirements for measurement? Are there ways to gather data on violence against women that you see as better reflecting the complexity of violence as a gendered phenomenon?

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