

**Domestic violence:
Developments in survey methodology**

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Introduction

Gendered violence constitutes a violation of human rights. The German national survey on violence against women is the latest in a developing series of national surveys documenting this abuse. These surveys started in the US in the 1970s, and have been developed since then in Canada, Australia, in many countries of the European Union, including Finland, Sweden, France and the UK (Walby 2001; Walby and Allen 2004), and elsewhere around the world.

These large-scale national surveys are very important in providing the robust evidential basis of the extent and nature of gendered violence. This information is needed both in order to develop and test explanations of the causes of gendered violence and also to develop and evaluate policies that may lead to its reduction and eradication.

This short paper situates the German survey within this international context. It addresses some of the complex issues about comparability between surveys and also some issues in the conceptualisation and measurement of its levels of severity. Each new national survey has been designed drawing on knowledge from the design of earlier ones. The German survey explicitly drew on the experience of other European surveys through an international advisory committee.

The German national survey on domestic violence

The German national survey on violence against women is a very important development in making public the extent and nature of violence against women. While the significance of domestic violence has long been known, in Germany as elsewhere, only the use of large scale survey methodology provides the information on its detailed prevalence, number of incidents and patterns in a way that is representative at the national level. Hence, this is an essential and major step in the production of an adequate evidential basis needed both to explain why it happens and to assist in the development of policy measures to tackle the problem.

The German national survey constitutes the most reliable source of evidence to-date of the extent and nature of violence against women. Its large sample size and robust methodology mean that it provides data that is available for advanced statistical analysis. It is likely to remain a key source of authoritative data on this topic for years to come.

Are findings comparable between surveys and between countries?

The findings from the German study are of direct relevance to Germany. In the context of a developing EU agenda on domestic violence, there is a question as to whether it is possible to make comparisons between Germany and other countries. First, data is presented which might compare the German and UK national survey (Walby and Allen 2004). Second, an assessment is made as to whether the methodology is sufficiently comparable for this to be a reasonable move.

The UK survey on gendered violence is a specialised part of the British Crime Survey (BCS). The BCS is a victim-centred crime survey carried out annually for the Home Office. In 2001, a special self-completion module was included within the survey, which asked about domestic violence, sexual assault and stalking (Walby and Allen 2004). This had a nationally representative sample of 22,463 women and men.

The following table presents data on adult life-time experience of gendered violence from the German and UK surveys.

Gendered violence in German and UK surveys

	% German women	% UK women	% UK men
Any physical or sexual abuse	40	45	26
Domestic violence	25	21	10
Rape	6	5	1
Harassment/Stalking	58	19	12

Sources: Mueller et al 2004; Walby and Allen (2004).

There is a question as to whether it is appropriate to draw the conclusion that there are similar levels of domestic violence and rape against women in Germany and the UK, and lesser amounts of stalking in the UK. This requires a consideration of both methodological and definitional issues.

There are several definitional issues, which affect each of the sub-categories of violence. A single example will be taken here, that of stalking. There are several methodological issues, including the sampling frame, age limitations, and the method of delivery of the questionnaire. The example taken here is that of the method of delivery of the questionnaire. There are further related issues as to the best summary indicator of gendered violence, the selection of which has a series of implications.

Defining stalking

In the UK survey, stalking is defined as a course of conduct in which there have to be at least two incidents. If there is only one incident of harassment, it is not included in the prevalence rate of stalking, since this does not constitute a ‘course of conduct’. The German survey definition is not so restrictive. Hence it is unsurprising that the German survey reports a higher rate of stalking than the UK. They are measuring different phenomena. They should not be directly compared, for this reason.

Delivering the questionnaire

A conventional way of delivering questionnaires is for an interviewer to ask the questions and record the answers provided by the respondent. It is well known from earlier research that the sensitivity of the questions may mean that respondents are reluctant to disclose incidents that may well be distressing. In both the German and the UK surveys, a device was found to address this, that of self-completion of a section of the questionnaire by the respondent. In this way the respondent has privacy during the process of detailing the events. In the case of the German survey the respondent was given a written questionnaire to complete in their own time. In the

case of the UK, the lap top computer that the interviewer had been using to enter the interviewees responses was turned around to the respondent. The respondent then read the questions from the screen, choice an answer from a short list, and tapped a key.

In the UK, the use of the more confidential methodology led to five times as many people disclosing inter-personal violence than in the section of the questionnaire when the interviewer had spoken the questions. This tremendous difference is probably largely due to the method of delivery of the questionnaire, though it is possible that other differences in the questionnaires may also have played a role.

This finding demonstrates the scale of the importance of the methodology of the survey. One conclusion to draw from this is that it may be unwise to compare findings from surveys that are delivered in different ways.

Summary indicators: Prevalence, incidents and gender

Gendered violence has many complex dimensions. Yet, often, policy makers prefer a single simple indicator of its extent in order to evaluate the impact of policy. In relation to gendered violence, one such indicator that has been put forward for consideration (by the UK government and also by the European Commission) is that of 'prevalence', a headcount of those who have suffered domestic violence (against both men and women in the UK proposal, against women only in the proposal by the European Commission). The prevalence rate has the advantage of simplicity and clarity. An alternative indicator might be that of the number of incidents. Indeed the number of incidents is the more usual way to measure the extent of crime. The choice of measure has complex gendered implications. This is because the prevalence rate appears to show less gender asymmetry than the number of incidents. This is because women subject to domestic violence suffer far more incidents than men do. The prevalence of domestic violence in the UK is 4% among women and 2% among men in the last year. This is a ratio of 2 to 1, female to male in the prevalence of domestic violence. The average (mean) number of incidents of domestic violence is higher among women at 20 as compared with 7 among men, so there were 12.9 million incidents of domestic violence against women, as compared with 2.4 million incidents against men in the last year. This is a gender ratio of over 5 to 1. This means that the choice of 'prevalence' or 'incidents' as the summary measure of domestic violence has implications for the summary understanding of the gender asymmetry of domestic violence.

Conclusions

The German national survey is a tremendous achievement, which will provide the basis of a better understanding of violence against women and thus a basis for more effective policy development to reduce and eliminate this violence.

The survey is a significant contribution to an international effort to better conceptualise and measure gendered violence. There have been major advances, with each national survey learning from and going further than previous surveys. One of the implications of the rapid development of this field is that the definitions and

methodologies are varied rather than uniform. Hence, as yet, it is appropriate to be cautious about the direct comparisons between the surveys.

A future step is the development within the European Union of a common methodology and a common set of definitions. If there were to be a single survey instrument in the EU it would be possible for comparisons between countries to be reliably conducted about the nature of gendered violence. This is a development that is needed sooner rather than later.

References

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