

# Women Physical Aggression (A Review)

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**Abstract:** Female aggression is a serious problem in most societies and is increasing these days in families. Female aggression has a negative effect on women as offender, their partners, children, and society in general. This paper aims to review the articles based on research that have been done on females' physical aggression. It attempts to show that females are also physically aggressive as males. According to the existing literatures, the rate of females' physical aggression is equal to those of males, and in some studies it is found to be higher than males. Based on these findings, it is concluded the rate of females' physical aggression is either equal to or higher than males, but not necessarily less than males. [Report and Opinion 2010;2(4):1-6]. (ISSN:1553-9873).

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## 1. Introduction

There is a common belief in almost every culture in this world that men are more aggressive than women. As stated by Eagly and Steffen (Franzoi, 1996) men are more likely than women to engage in aggression that produces pain or physical injury. Thus, aggressive behavior by women has been neglected by people and the society at large (Straus, 2006). Hitherto, aggression which happens within the context of the family was mainly attributed to males. However, findings from several research reveal that females are as aggressive as their male counterparts (Hamel, 2005; Brown, 2004; George, 2003; Cercone, Beach & Arias, 2005; Straus, 2004; Katz, Kuffel & Coblenz, 2002; Dutton, 2007; Felson, 2006). Although female aggression and conflict have always been a part of human society, however, it has rather remained under researched until in the early of 1970s (Dutton & Nicholls, 2005).

In 1980, Straus carried out a large-scale national survey of family aggression in the United States, where he found that 23% females reported engaging in aggression against their partners. Since then, researchers have shown an increased interest in female aggression, and have heightened the need for investigating this phenomenon across the world's societies (Perry & Fromuth, 2005; Straus, 2006; Cook, 1997; Capaldi & Owen, 2001; Kaura & Allen, 2004; Nicholls & Dutton, 2001; Magdol, Moffitt, Caspi & Newman, 1997; Straus, 1997). Although different sources have reported aggression between spouses (Perry & Fromuth, 2005; O'Leary and Slep, 2006;

Hood & Carruthers, 2002), these have led to the recognition of the fact that the female aggression is a common phenomenon in the society (Brown 2004; Swan & Snow, 2002). However, there are mixed reports on the amount and type of observed aggressive behaviours with respect to gender. Jenkins and Aube (2002) revealed that women as compared with their male counterparts were more aggressive in certain conditions, and more likely to kick, hit or physically assault their husband. Although some researchers argue that female aggression is a relatively new problem, it has largely remained under reported (Straus, 2006). In general, the complicated nature of human behavior, these include different cultures and family values do not allow for a general consensus on the issue. This paper attempts to review several literatures that deal with women aggression, particularly physical aggression.

## 2. The Concept of Aggression and Its Causes

Baron and Byrne (2000) define aggression as any behavior directed toward the goal of harming another people who is motivated to avoid such treatment. In other words, aggression is related to the intentional infliction of some form of harm to others. Meanwhile, Franzoi (1996) categorizes aggression into two main types - instrumental aggression and hostile aggression. Instrumental aggression is the intentional use of harmful behavior so that one can achieve some other goal; while hostile aggression is the intentional use of harmful behavior in which the goal is simply to cause injury or death to the victim. Aggression can also be

categorized into legal aggression and illegal aggression (Ma'rof, 2001). Legal aggression refers to the aggressive behaviors that are legally accepted by the norm (laws) of particular society (e.g., a policeman kills a criminal); meanwhile, illegal aggression refers to the aggressive behaviors that are not accepted by the norm.

There are several theories that discuss the causes of aggression. The instinct perspective sees aggression stems from innate urges and tendencies. The major proponents of this perspective were Sigmund Freud and Konrad Lorenz. Sigmund Freud believed that aggression stems mainly from a death wish (*thanatos*) acquire by all human being. This theory stresses that death instinct is initially aimed at self-destruction, but is soon redirected outward, toward others. Meanwhile, Lorenz suggested that aggression develops mainly from an inherited fighting instinct that human beings share with many other species. However, social psychologists reject these instinct theories, where they believe that aggression stems mainly from an externally elicited drive to harm others. Their theories are called drive theories of aggression. Among the proponents is Berkowitz (1989). The theories suggest that external conditions, especially frustration, disappointment or any interference with goal-directed behavior, can rouse a strong motive to harm others. The aggressive drive, in turn, leads to overt acts of aggression. On the other hand, there are modern theories that discuss the causes of aggression. These new theories take into consideration of many factors that contribute to aggressive behavior. One of the theories is called general affective aggression model (GAAM) which was proposed by Anderson (1997). This model suggests that aggression is triggered or elicited by a wide range of inputs variables. Inputs variables are aspects of the current situations and/or tendencies individuals bring with them to a given situation. According to Baron and Byrne (2000), there are two main groups of input variables. The first group of input variables include: frustration, some kind of attack from other person (e.g., an assault), exposure to aggressive models (other people behaving aggressively), the present of cues associated with aggression (e.g., gun and other weapons), and virtually anything that causes individuals to experience discomfort. The other group of input variables is individual differences, which include traits that predispose individual toward aggression (e.g., irritability), certain belief and attitudes violence (e.g., believing that it is acceptable and appropriate), values about violence (e.g., the view that it is a "good" thing), and specific skills related to aggression (e.g., knowing how to fight and to use weapons). These situational and individual differences

variables may lead to overt aggression - first through increasing the physiological arousal or excitement (arousal); second through arousing the hostile feeling (affective stage); and third, through inducing individuals to think hostile thoughts or bring hostile memories to mind (cognitions). Depending on individuals' interpretations (appraisals) of the current situation and possible restraining factors, aggression either occurs or does not occur.

Aggression can take several forms – verbal, emotional and physical. The focus of this paper is on physical aggression. Tremblay et, al (1999) argued that physical aggression includes biting, hitting, kicking, assault, getting involved in fight, encounter with a weapon, rape, homicide, and threatening to use physical force. Physical aggression occur when there is any non-accidental form of physical and assault injury. It can involve burning, pushing, shoving, shaking, kicking on a person or on property (Kar, 2000).

### **3. Literatures Related to Female Physical Aggression**

Female aggression has existed almost in all cultures and countries. Most of the literature presented in the field of female aggression has linked male and female aggression and for this reason, in this paper the writers bring the literature that compares the two groups of male and female. These literatures aim to show the fact that female physical aggression is prevalent like male physical aggression in which the level of female physical is not lower than men, and there is a requisite to study female physical aggression as male physical aggression. The high level of development, knowledge and welfare in some developed countries has triggered the study of female aggression. However, in undeveloped countries, due to shortage of financial budget for research and the attitude toward female aggression, the study of female aggression is believed as no longer required. Moreover, the presence of patriarchal opinion in the university and government has ignored cases of female aggression.

According to Moyer (1977), female aggression is a recent topic. Physical aggression after marriage has been studied by several researches. Physical force is a common way of resolving problems and fights in any marriage life and couple relations. Although the aggressive behaviors are different from culture to culture, however, there are some similarities where in general aggressive behaviors can be predicted. For the purpose of having a comprehensive picture of female aggression, we need to search several countries that have carried out studies related to female aggression. Although the contexts are different and we can not

generalize these findings to other cultures, however, there are still some similarities between cultures in terms of causes and nature of female aggression.

This incidence of violence has been studied within the context of families as well. For instance, Kim and Emery (2003) have studied 1500 South Koreans couples. The results indicated that the ratio of male to female aggression was 27.8%, while the female to male was observed to be 15.8%. In Caetano, Schafer, Field, & Nelson (2002), about 1635 couples performed on Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS). The result indicated that the agreement concerning mutual partner violence was about 40%. In this study, wives reported that they were committing more partner violence than their spouses across the three ethnic groups. This is assumed to support the race-free and ethnicity-free profile of violence.

The same findings of studies, bearing more or less similarities, were observed across other studies. Simonelli, Mullis, Elliot, & Pierce (2002), for example, in an their experimental study, had investigated 120 students, of whom 61 were boys, and 59 were girl. In their study, the researchers used the CTS. It was realized that, from both genders, 10% of boys and 33% of girls have committed at least one type of physical aggressive behaviors. Moreover, it was found that 18% of boys and 15% of girls had experience physical aggression from their partners. The other study was conducted by Schumacher and Leonard (2005), in which they had a sample of 634 newly married couples. From this sample, 60% were Euro-American and 30% were African-American, who completed the CTS2 on 3 situations for a period of three years. The percentage of wife to husband aggression in this study was estimated to be 48%, 45%, and 41%; whereas, the husband to wife aggression was observed to be 37%, 38%, and 37% across the years of investigation.

There are some other researchers who have analyzed the available research reports in order to present a collective account of the issue of female and wives aggression. Mallory, McCloskey, Griggsby and Gardner (2003), in a review research which examines women's use of violence in intimate relationships have presented a cumulative account of the issue. In another study, Lewis and Fremouw (2001), in an examination of the literature cited that there are many evidences that females initiate more violence than males. However, the current writers believe that such studies need to be based on a meta-analysis of either descriptive research or surveys so far have been conducted with respect to the role and nature of female aggression, which is definitely absent in the reviewed literature, except for few cases. For example, Archer

(2000) in a meta-analyses of sex differences in physical aggression indicated that women were more likely than men to use one or more acts of physical aggression and to use such acts more frequently. Looking at the possibility of getting injuries, women were found to be injured, and research shows that 62% of women are injured as the result of these abuses (Archer, 2000). Moreover, conducting a meta-analysis study entails certain methodological steps among which, similarity of the scope of the researches included in meta-analysis and similar objectives are just a few. This seems not have been possible due to the wide scope of research in aggression by now.

The issue of female aggression has been investigated yet from another perspective, i.e. gender parity of partners. Leisring, Dowd and Rosenbaum (2003), discussed information regarding gender equality in partner aggression. They provided a working reason for the study of female offenders and describe characteristics of partner of these aggressive women. In their study, they presented the treatment program for partners of aggressive women at University of Massachusetts Medical School.

Meanwhile, Katz, Kuffel and Coblenz (2002) reported two studies, in which there were dating men and women experiencing violence at comparable levels. It was found that men have experienced more frequent moderate violence compared to women. In the first study from a sample of 183 women and 103 men, 55% of the women had reported no case of violence with their partners, while 50% of men only had nonviolent mates. In the second study, it was reported that from 78 women and 45 men who were eligible for this research, 73% of women had nonviolent partners. This figure is reported against the 58% of men who have reported no violence from their female mates.

Graham, Plant, & Plant (2004), in a study which was conducted as a cross-sectional study, adopted a sample of 2027. The sample consisted of 1052 women and 975 men. In this research both groups were interviewed looking for their experience of partner aggression. The findings showed that 16% of women were physically aggressing their male mates within a period of two years as reported to the interviewers. For the male participants only 13% had experienced some physical aggression towards their female mates.

George (2003), and an analysis of female initiated aggression reported some historical, as well as empirical case evidences to prove the reality of "battered husband syndrome". This review is however, re-confirmed by other researchers, for example, Felson (2006) who reported that while men were eight times

more likely to commit overall violence than women, there was a gender equality in partner violence.

In another study which was conducted as a longitudinal study, Fergusson, Horwood and Ridder (2005) examined that the scope of the extent of domestic violence experience. This study had a sample of 828 of whom 437 were women and 391 were men. These participants were all young adults around 25 years old. The participants were selected for a long term longitudinal study and they were asked to take the CTS2. The results revealed that there were more men exposed to severe domestic violence compared to women. Moreover, it was found that, mild and moderate rates of violence were similar for men and women. In the study, 39.4% of women and 30.9% of men reported violence scores of 3 or higher. However, in terms of initiation of partner assaults, it was found that 34% of women and 12% of men have reported initiating physical assaults.

As an evidence of treating these figures with caution, Felton & Pare (2005), has analyzed the data from The National Violence Against Women Survey, and they have found that male victims are particularly reluctant to report assaults by their female partners. The possible reasons for non-reporting include: fear of reprisal, or they have this perception that police could do nothing to help and charges would not be believed.

The other relatively recent study was conducted by Dutton (2007). He has researched female intimate partner violence and developmental trajectories of abusive families. He realized that female violence towards intimate male partners was just as severe and has similar consequences as male violence towards women. This report supports the mixed results as the findings in this regard are mixed across the available research literature. For example, Cercone, Beach and Arias (2005), in their study of 414 students, from whom 189 were men and 225 were women, revealed that male and female subjects were equally committing acts of minor violence in intimate dating relationships. However, it was realized that women were twice more likely compared to men to commit severe acts of violence.

From among other comprehensive researches, Brown (2004), has summarized the available partner violence data from the 1999 Canadian General Social Survey (GSS). The GSS was based on a representative sample of 25,876 persons. In a period of one year of the research period, an estimated of 3% of Canadian women and 2% of Canadian men were reported experiencing violence from their partners. The report continues to report the 5 year period from 1995-1999,

in which an estimated 8% of Canadian women and 7% of Canadian men reported violence from their partners. The researcher has reviewed the available police and legal responses to domestic violence in Edmonton, Canada. He has concluded that men who were involved in disputes with their partners were disadvantaged by the police or the entertainers and were treated less favorably.

In terms of kinds of aggressive behaviors, Archer (2002) reported that women were more likely than men to throw thing at their partners. Among other possible reactions, he stated that slapping, kicking, biting, punching and hitting with an object were more common. On the other hand, he reported that men were more likely than women to strangle, choke, or beat up their partners.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Female aggression is a serious problem in most societies and is increasing these days in families all around the world. Female aggression has a negative effect on women as offenders, their partners, children, and society in general. Thus more researches on female aggression are needed. This paper reviews the female physical aggression. According to the existing literatures, the rate of female physical aggression is equal to those of men, and in some studies, the rates of physical aggression among women are found to be higher than men. Some researches show that men and women are physically abusing each other at the same rates. Based on these findings, the rate of women physical aggression not to be lower than men, instead it is either equal to or higher than men.

There are consequences of family aggression. The negative attributes of family aggression on the child and the society are undeniable, and have marked detrimental consequences for both victims and aggressors (Andrews & Brewin, 1990; Campbell, 2002; Hood & Carruthers, 2002; Kanoy, Ulku-Sreiner, Cox, & Burchinal, 2003; Stark & Flitcraft, 1996; Walker, 2000). These latter effects made it worthy of attention, from the viewpoint of female aggression (Strauss, 2006). Moreover, the development of research institutions, allocation of budgets and the accessibility to scientific resources in some countries have allowed researchers to present a clear picture of the phenomenon (Felson, 2007; Horwood et al. 2005). Although the rate of female aggression in some studies is higher, women are still physically weaker than men, thus the rate of injuries for women is higher. In all situations, if women use aggression or their husband reacts or uses aggression, the injuries for women is higher than men. Thus more study is needed on female

aggression.

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