

————— **Research Report** —————

**Women and Violence:  
Theory, Risk, and Treatment  
Implications**

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**Women and Violence: Theory, Risk, and  
Treatment Implications**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Although men continue to commit the vast majority of violent offences, recent research suggests that women's involvement in violent crime has increased over the past decade (Bell, 2004). As a result, there has been a burgeoning interest in understanding why some women behave violently. This report begins with a snapshot of violent women offenders in Canada. The theories that have been proposed to explain women's violent behaviour, as well as the factors that have been found to place women at-risk for violence, are subsequently reviewed. Finally, programs targeting violent behaviour among women offenders are highlighted.

A snapshot of the federal women offender population revealed that 57% were in custody or under community supervision for having committed a violent offence. Eleven percent of these women had been incarcerated for more than one violent offence conviction as an adult. More women convicted of a violent offence were serving their sentence in an institution relative to the community, most commonly for a robbery, assault, or second degree murder conviction. These women tended to be in their mid-30s, and more than half identified themselves as being of Caucasian ethnicity. One quarter of women incarcerated for a violent offence were serving a life sentence. The vast majority were high or moderate risk and high need offenders.

Theories on women and violence stress the importance of processes both internal and external to the individual in understanding women's acts of aggression. At present, social learning perspectives, in which modeling and observational learning are held to be of utmost importance, dominate contemporary thought and have received the most empirical support (Artz, 1998). Also drawing on socialization processes, personality theorists have illuminated an overcontrolled personality style among women who behave violently (Ogle, Maier-Katkin, & Bernard, 1995), while feminist theories have drawn attention to the importance of broader societal factors as contributors to women's acts of aggression (Kurz, 1993). Models specific to domestic violence have also been proposed, and interpret women's use of violence within the context of their own victimization histories, their experiences of childhood trauma, and the depressive and posttraumatic symptoms that ensue (Swan & Snow, 2006).

The theories that have emerged are commendable for incorporating several of the risk factors related to women's violence. Women's status in a gendered society has been found to play a prominent role in their violent behaviour, with low socioeconomic status, unemployment, poverty, and a lack of educational and vocational opportunities, all heightening women's risk for behaving violently (Batchelor, 2005; Hien, 1998; Pollock, Mullings, & Crouch, 2006). These factors are also related to gang membership, and gangs often provide an environment conducive to violence (Campbell, 1991). At the familial level, witnessing violence in the family of origin and being the victim of physical or sexual abuse are significant contributors to women's violence (Babcock, Miller, & Siard, 2003), and individual level risk factors include attribution biases, personality pathology, suicide attempts, and substance abuse (Batchelor, 2005; MacBrayer, Milich, & Hundley, 2003; Putkonen, Komulainen, Virkkunen, Eronen, & Lönnqvist, 2003). Importantly, many of these factors appear to be more influential in predicting women's violence risk than men's.

The study of women's motives for violence has largely negated prior convictions that women's acts of aggression are spurred only in the context of self-defence. Violence perpetrated by

women may be driven by a desire to injure the other person; or to achieve control, compliance, or retribution from their victim (Ben-David, 1993; Babcock et al., 2003). Women's violence is more likely than men's to be economically motivated, undertaken for survival purposes, and as a way of releasing accumulated tension (Campbell, 1993; Cunningham, 2000). Disrespect and jealousy may also prompt some women to behave violently (Kruttschnitt & Carbone-Lopez, 2006).

The risk factors and motives that have been identified bear important implications for a women-centered violence prevention program. At present, the Spirit of a Warrior Program is the only program developed specifically for violent women offenders in Canada. However, its application is tailored to the unique needs of Aboriginal women offenders.

The remainder of the programs that have incorporated a violence prevention or anger management component were originally developed for men and have subsequently been applied to women, with minimal inquiry into whether they are actually effective with the women offender population. The sound body of empirical evidence documenting the importance of gender-informed programming clearly underscores the need for a new program targeting non-Aboriginal women offenders who are incarcerated for violent offences.

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## INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, there has been a burgeoning interest in gaining a better understanding of violent women offenders. Although men continue to commit the vast majority of violent offences, it has increasingly become recognized that women can and do behave violently, and that their involvement in certain types of violent crimes has increased over time, most notably for crimes involving assault or aggravated assaults (Greenfeld & Snell, 1999; Pollack & Davis, 2005; Shaw & Dubois, 1995). While these crimes tend to be the less serious of the violent offences,<sup>1</sup> they are associated with considerable costs to the criminal justice system and to society as a whole. As a result of these factors, researchers have begun to explore the correlates of violence among women offenders and some theoretical models have been proposed to explain women's violence. The present review provides a summary of these theories, as well as the most prominent risk factors for violence among women reported in the literature. The motives and circumstances surrounding women's violent behaviour will also be underscored. Lastly, an overview of the few treatment programs that have been designed to target violent behaviour among women offenders will be discussed and recommendations for future programming efforts will be put forth. This review will clearly underline the need for a woman-centered violence prevention program, an initiative currently being undertaken by the Correctional Service of Canada.

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<sup>1</sup> In Canada, violent crimes listed in the Criminal Code include Schedule I offences and Murder I and Murder II.

## WOMEN AND VIOLENCE

### A Snapshot of Violent Women in Canadian Federal Institutions

As of the 8<sup>th</sup> of April 2007, there were 989 women offenders under federal custody or community supervision in Canada. Of these women, 559 (56.5%) were serving their current sentence for a violent offence conviction, 59 (11.0%) of which had been convicted of more than one violent offence as an adult. More women were serving their sentence incarcerated (57.2%) than in the community (42.8%).

Focusing on women *incarcerated* for a violent offence ( $n = 320$ ), the mean age of this group was 35 years, comparable to that of the general women offender population and the profile of violent women offenders reported in other Canadian studies (Bell, 2004). Over half self-identified as Caucasian (52.5%), followed by: Aboriginal (37.2%), Black (4.4%), and Other (4.4%). Asian offenders were the least likely to be incarcerated for a violent offence conviction (1.6%), although they also comprise the smallest portion of the total federal offender population (Trevethan & Rastin, 2004)

An examination of the incarcerated population of violent women offenders' sentencing and offence-related information revealed that approximately one-quarter of these women were serving a life sentence. The remainder were serving a determinate sentence, the average length of which was just over three and a half years. The most common violent offence conviction was for robbery (32.8%), followed by: assault (18.4%), second degree murder (16.6%), manslaughter (14.4%), other violent offences (8.1%), and first degree murder (7.2%). Sexual offences and attempted murder were the least common violent offence convictions (1.9% and 0.6%, respectively).

Perhaps not surprising given the violent nature of their crimes, the vast majority of women incarcerated for a violent offence were assessed as high-risk and high need offenders.<sup>2</sup> Together, nearly 85% were judged to be at a high- or moderate-risk to re-offend (43.8% and 41.1%, respectively). Only 15.1% of the women were rated low-risk. Similarly, nearly two-thirds (63.0%) were judged to be high need and close to one-third were found to be moderate need (31.5%). Less than 6% were considered low need.

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<sup>2</sup> Risk/need information was not available for 8.8% of the women incarcerated for a violent offence (i.e., 292 out of 320 offenders) as these women were still going through the intake assessment process at the time this snapshot was taken. Hence, these results are based on 292 women.

At the domain-level of analysis, the areas of greatest need were in the personal/emotional and substance abuse domains, while the area of lowest need was in the community functioning domain (see table 1).<sup>3</sup> These findings are consistent with the findings from other research on women offenders incarcerated for violent offences (Bell, 2004; Gabora et al., in press). However, the women described in the present snapshot appear to have lower employment, associates, and family/marital needs than those documented elsewhere for this population (Bell, 2004; Gabora et al., in press). These latter discrepancies may be a result of the methodology employed (i.e., a snapshot compared to longer study periods).

**Table 1: Identified Needs Among Women Incarcerated for Violent Offences**

<b>Need Domain</b>	<b>Identified Needs<sup>a</sup></b>
Personal/emotional orientation	82%
Substance abuse	70%
Associates/social interaction	45%
Family/marital	40%
Employment	30%
Attitudes	31%
Community functioning	19%

*Note.* <sup>a</sup>Identified needs are defined as “some” or “considerable” needs in the domain.

Taken together, these results paint a portrait of women offenders incarcerated for violent offences in Canada. The finding that more than half of these women self-identify as Caucasian underscores the need for a violence prevention program for this population. Since most are serving relatively short sentences, the implementation of such a program early in their sentence will be of considerable importance for ensuring that their needs are addressed prior to release. A gender-informed treatment model for this group requires a thorough understanding of women’s risk factors for violence, which could be enhanced by considering the theoretical underpinnings of women’s violent behaviour.

<sup>3</sup> Information was only available for 274 women (out of 320) on each of the seven need domains assessed at intake.

## **Theory on Women and Violence**

### ***The Gender Disparity in Violent Crime***

To date, the vast majority of theories on female offenders have examined issues surrounding women's increased involvement in crime over time (see Blanchette & Brown, 2006), with scant attention specifically addressing violent crimes committed by women. Of those theories that have explored women and violence, they have typically sought to explain why women are less likely to commit violent crimes than men (Lerner, 1985; Pollock, 1999). Early on, these centered upon biological theories, all of which concentrated on the physical differences between men and women and invariably included references to testosterone, neurochemicals linked to impulsivity, and the greater muscular strength of men (see Pollock, 1999). More commonly, however, cultural and/or socialization theories have dominated the literature on gender differences in violence (Campbell, 1993; Lerner, 1985). Pivotal to these theories is the differential socialization of men and women, where men are rewarded for violence and women punished and taught to suppress any aggressive impulses (Campbell, 1993). As an extension of socialization theories, in seeking to explain women's purported increase in violent crime, liberation theory suggests that socialization processes have changed over time as a result of the second wave of feminism and women's resultant emergence into non-traditional sex roles (Adler, 1975). As a result, women have supposedly adopted more masculine behaviours, including those that are violent.

### ***Why are Some Women Violent?***

In contrast to theories addressing the gender disparity in violent crime rates, the focus on why *some* women commit such crimes and others do not, has been a largely neglected area of study. Furthermore, with but a few notable exceptions (e.g., Verona & Carbonell, 2000), virtually none of these theories have been empirically evaluated. Nevertheless, the theories that have emerged are commendable for having incorporated many of the risk factors for violent offending that are relatively unique to female populations. This has resulted in a shift away from the mere extension of male-centered theories of violent crime to women offenders, a pattern that is characteristic of much of the early correctional literature. Moreover, traditional theories that portray women as social deviants who commit violent acts as a result of biological aberrations (e.g., hormones) (d'Orban & Dalton, 1980; Mazur, 1983; Taylor, 1984) have largely been discredited and no longer predominate contemporary thought. Instead, current theorists view the subject with social, structural, economic, and gender considerations, and underscore the

importance of the context surrounding the issue. The present section provides a brief summary of these theories.

### *Social Learning Theory*

One of the most influential theories that has addressed why some women behave violently is the social learning theory initially articulated by Bandura (1978). Although not specific to women, this theory holds that modeling is central to the development of violence and is supported by the well documented finding that violent females are more likely to have experienced violence in their homes growing up than their non-violent counterparts, either between family members or as victims themselves (Babcock et al., 2003; Dekeserdy, 2000; Greenfeld & Snell, 1999). As young girls these women are essentially taught that power and control are achieved through physical force, and that survival means dominating the weaker members of society (Artz, 1998). This would seem to explain why the most common victims of female violence are other women and children, particularly when it comes to assaultive behaviours (Greenfeld & Snell, 1999; Pollack & Davis, 2005; Weizmann-Henelius, Viemero, & Eronen, 2003). Falshaw (2005) further notes that, after repeated exposure, individuals can become desensitized to violence and end up viewing it as a normal part of everyday life. When violent behaviours are reinforced (e.g., by achieving the desired objective), they are more likely to be repeated in the future (Akers, 1998). The importance of modeling in the development of violent behaviours has been empirically established in the social psychology arena where experimental designs have routinely shown that girls and boys who observe aggressive behaviour are at-risk for behaving violently themselves (Isom, 1998; Moretti, Obsuth, Odgers, & Reebye, 2006).

In addition to their emphasis on the learning of behaviour through observation, life experiences, and reinforcement, social learning theorists have increasingly come to realize the relevance of individuals' cognitive processes in the development and maintenance of violent behaviour (Akers, 1998). In support of their influence, Grant and Butler (1998) found that young women who were violent held more antisocial beliefs than their non-violent peers, and others have reported violent women to misinterpret environmental cues in a manner conducive to violence (e.g., hostile attribution bias) (Leschied, Cummings, Van Brunschot, Cunningham, & Saunders, 2001). Thus, social learning theory provides a useful framework for understanding women's violence.

### *Feminist Theories*

Unlike social learning theory, feminist theories have traditionally not addressed the role of cognitive processes in violent behaviour and instead focus on the broader societal and cultural influences as contributing factors (Kurz, 1993). These researchers contend that female violence is a reaction to male dominance and abuse, and the patriarchal values of society that epitomize men and devalue women's roles (Kurz, 1993; Lowe & Hubbard, 1990; Oberman, 1992). Sexual oppression and economic dependence within relationships are also proposed to be critical determinants of women's violence against their partners (Kurz, 1993).

More recently, a Feminist Ecological Model (FEM) has been proposed that underscores the importance of context in women's commission of violent acts (Ballou, Matsumoto, & Wagner, 2002). This model addresses the complexity of women's violence, taking into account interactions between social, historical, institutional, *and* individual factors in understanding their behaviour (Das Dasgupta, 2002). As such, this model consists of four interactive levels, with the first situating the individual in the environment (Ballou et al., 2002). At this level, cognitions, temperament, socialization, and interactions with significant others are prominent, as are the dimensions comprising an individual's identity (e.g., ethnicity, class, age). The second level, referred to as the microsystem by some (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 2005), is concerned with the family environment and the important role it plays in shaping the individual's thoughts and beliefs. The FEM suggests that gender and culture will influence how individuals interact with their family and immediate environment (Ballou et al., 2002). The next level, the exosystem, is comprised of the broader community outside the home, including the individual's school and neighbourhood. Interactions between these systems are proposed to influence the individual's development, such as the exchanges between parents and school or parents and the workplace (Ballou et al., 2002). The macrosystem, or society at large, is the final level and includes such factors as culture, socioeconomic group, ethnicity, media influences, and exposure to violence. Each of these systems or levels interacts with one another in a reciprocal fashion, thereby shaping individuals' lives (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Consequently, one's use of violence is suggested to be influenced by exposure to violence in the family of origin, in the community in which one resides, and cultural depictions of violence (Jonson-Reid, 1998). Although studies applying the FEM to examine violence perpetrated by women are lacking, variables associated with each of these levels have been identified as risk factors for violence among young and adult

women. For example, individual factors such as social cognitive processing deficits and personality disorders have been noted to be prominent among violent women offenders (Babcock et al., 2003; Carlen, 2002; Ogle et al., 1995), as have characteristics of the family environment or the microsystem, particularly family violence (Babcock et al., 2003; Batchelor, 2005), the exosystem (e.g., negative peer influences) (Caspi, Lynam, Moffitt, & Silva, 1993), and the macrosystem (e.g., media portrayals of violence) (Anderson et al., 2003; Huesmann, Moise-Titus, Podolski, & Eron, 2003). Since risk factors can be cumulative, more risk factors present across these levels may increase the likelihood of engaging in violent behaviour.

### *The Overcontrolled Personality*

Rather than focusing solely on the external processes guiding violent behaviour, theories examining the overcontrolled and undercontrolled personality constructs emphasize that factors both internal and external to the individual are instrumental in predicting violence (Megargee, 1966; Ogle et al., 1995). Megargee (1966) initially identified these personality styles among male juvenile offenders and found the undercontrolled personality to be particularly characteristic of aggressive boys. In general, these individuals have lowered inhibitions against aggressive behaviour and, as a result, are more likely to respond aggressively when frustrated or provoked. Overcontrolled aggressors, on the other hand, were far less common but tended to be more characteristic of young men who committed extremely violent crimes such as homicide. These offenders showed lower overall rates of aggression and a more docile demeanor. It was hypothesized that these men inhibited feelings of anger to such a degree that it resulted in anger accumulating over time and through repeated provocations, with the end result ultimately being an explosion of anger and violence, but on a much less frequent basis.

More recently, Ogle and colleagues (1995) extended this theory to female homicide offenders, and suggested that socialization processes teach women to inhibit expressions of anger, thereby compelling them to internalize negative affective states as guilt, hurt, and depression, rather than externalize it as anger (Ogle et al., 1995). As a result of these societal inhibitions, women are prevented from developing culturally appropriate ways of expressing feelings of anger. Furthermore, it is proposed that as the number of stresses in a woman's life increase (e.g., motherhood, poverty, unemployment, and messages of societal devaluation), inadequate means of dealing with these stressors leads to pent-up negative emotions which may eventually surpass their inhibition threshold and erupt in violence (Ogle et al., 1995). Thus, this theory integrates

the structural, social and cultural conditions of modern societies that generate strain for women, and can account for the low socioeconomic status frequently reported to characterize women who commit violent acts (Batchelor, 2005; Pollock, Mullings, & Crouch, 2006), as well as their poorly developed and inadequate coping skills for dealing with stressful situations and affective states (Ogle et al., 1995). It also sheds light on why women who are in chronically abusive relationships may eventually be motivated to commit such extreme acts as murdering their partner (Ogle, Maier-Katkin, & Bernard, 1998). Importantly, preliminary research provides support for this dispositional style among violent women, with most females who are violent tending to be one-time violent offenders who present with an overcontrolled personality (Verona & Carbonell, 2000). By comparison, far fewer violent women are repeat violent offenders who exhibit an undercontrolled style of responding to their environment. These findings are in contrast to the undercontrolled personality pervasive among violent male offenders (Megargee, 1966).

#### *Theory on Women's Intimate Partner Violence*

Women's violence in the context of intimate relationships has been extensively studied, albeit with conflicting results. Some studies suggest that women are considerably less likely to be violent against their partner (Greenfeld et al., 1998; Kurz, 1998; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000), whereas others have found that women are just as violent as men (see Felson, 2002). Still others have found that women are more likely to be the perpetrators of intimate partner violence (Archer, 2000; Caetano, Schafer, Field, & Nelson, 2002). These studies are often criticized for their failure to contextualize women's violence in the domestic sphere (Swan & Snow, 2006) and, as a result, have spurred the development of theories attempting to address these gaps.

Swan and Snow (2006) recently proposed a comprehensive framework for understanding women's intimate partner violence (IPV) and suggest that this violence is best understood in the context of their own victimization. Female perpetrators of IPV are often abused by their male partners and as the violence by one partner increases, so too does the other. Motivations for violence and coping are also considered to influence violent behaviour in the model. According to the authors, women's motives may be defensive, where fear, self-defence, or protecting their children from harm are the primary instigating factors, or the motives may be active, in which case control or retribution are the main goals. Avoidance coping, such as avoiding dealing with problems in a proactive manner, is depicted as predicting higher levels of women's violence,



whereas problem-solving and support-seeking coping are portrayed as reducing the likelihood of women's violence. Childhood trauma is incorporated into the model and is shown to predict greater use of avoidance coping and higher levels of women's violence and victimization by their partners. Importantly, Swan and Snow's framework underscores the adverse psychological affects associated with women's victimization such as higher rates of depression, anxiety, posttraumatic stress disorder, and substance abuse, thereby covering both the antecedents and consequences of women's violence. Contextual factors such as race, ethnicity, culture, and socioeconomic status are also recognized to colour the nature and meaning of women's experience of domestic violence in this model.

### **Risk Factors for Violence Committed by Women**

The increased involvement of women in violent crime has made gaining a better understanding of risk factors for violence an important undertaking for correctional researchers and personnel. Researchers who study women offenders have identified multiple risk factors related to women's violent behaviour, many of which distinguish them from their male counterparts and from non-violent women offenders. These include environmental, familial, and individual factors.

#### ***Environmental Risk Factors***

At the broadest level of study, many of the environmental or societal factors that have been identified as contributors to women's violent behaviour draw attention to women's status in a gendered society. Unemployment, low socioeconomic status, poverty, and lack of access to educational and vocational opportunities, have all been cited in this regard (Batchelor, 2005; Hien, 1998; Pollock et al., 2006).

More recently, the increasing number of women joining gangs has brought awareness to the relationship between gang membership and violence for this population (Jones, Roper, Stys, & Wilson, 2004; Mackenzie & Johnson, 2003). Incarcerated female gang affiliates are considerably more likely to be convicted for violent offences compared to non-affiliated offenders, making gang affiliation a risk factor for violent behaviour (Mackenzie & Johnson, 2003). This is perhaps not surprising given that the profile of gang women is characterized by several of the risk factors for violence that are described below. In particular, these women show higher levels of disregard for others, lower frustration tolerance, higher levels of aggression, and more hostility problems, than their non-affiliated peers (Mackenzie & Johnson, 2003). Female gang affiliates also tend to

be low-income women who have faced such acute hardships as turbulent family lives, poverty, abuse, and lack of education and career opportunities (Campbell, 1991; Mackenzie & Johnson, 2003). Thus, for these women, gangs often provide a place where women who have typically been socially and economically marginalized feel a sense of belonging, acceptance, and security, with violence frequently undertaken as a means of solidifying their place in the group, establishing their reputation or, at the most basic level, in order to ensure their survival (Campbell, 1991).

### ***Family Level Risk Factors***

Other factors that are external to the individual and highly influential in predicting violence risk can be found in the family environment. Women who are violent have often witnessed violence in their homes growing up, most often between their parents but also between and against siblings (Babcock et al., 2003). In addition, statistics drawn from both the U.S. and Canada suggest that violent women offenders are often the victims of violence themselves and at considerably higher rates than non-violent women offenders and violent male offenders (Batchelor, 2005; Dekeserdy, 2000; Greenfeld & Snell, 1999; Pollock et al., 2006). Indeed, in American prisons, 60% of adult women offenders incarcerated for violent offences reported being physically or sexually abused during childhood, and slightly more than one-third reported being abused by a partner (Greenfeld & Snell, 1999). In Canada, nearly 70% of federally incarcerated women reported being physically abused and approximately half reported being sexually abused (Dekeserdy, 2000). From a social learning perspective, individuals learn aggressive solutions to problems via parental modeling and, since relationships play a more prominent role in females' social development (Gilligan, 1982; Maccoby, 1998), women may be especially vulnerable to violent behaviour in future relational contexts (Graves, 2007). This is supported by the growing recognition of women's role in intimate partner violence among those who were abused early in life (Loy, Machen, Beulieu, & Greif, 2005; Swan & Snow, 2006), as well as the greater likelihood that these women know their victims, compared to violent men (Leschied et al., 2001; Pollock & Davis, 2005; Weizmann-Henelius et al., 2003).

Contributing to a dysfunctional family environment, violent women offenders tend to report more exposure to parental substance abuse and parental mental health problems relative to non-violent women offenders, and they are also more likely to have had a parent who has been to

prison (Pollock et al., 2006). Pro-violent parental attitudes have also been found to contribute to female violence (Leschied et al., 2001).

### ***Individual Level Risk Factors***

One of the ways in which parental attitudes may influence females' violent behaviour is through the internalization of their violence supporting attitudes as young women, particularly when it is the mother who holds these dysfunctional beliefs (MacBrayer et al., 2003). In this regard, a hostile attribution bias and selective attention to aggressive cues have both been noted to be risk factors for female violence (Leschied et al., 2001), and these thought processes have been found to be related between mothers and daughters (Graves, 2007). As such, violent women tend to perceive hostile intent in ambiguous interpersonal situations that create negative feelings for them, and they also tend to focus more on potentially aggressive behaviours than pro-social ones. External blame attribution, where women who are violent either blame their partner (in the case of domestic abuse) or claim a lack of control as the cause of their behaviour, has also been documented in recent research (Babcock et al., 2003).

In addition to these social cognitive processing deficits, several psychological factors appear to be more strongly linked to women's violence than men's. Personality disorders in particular have emerged as prominent risk factors for violence by women, most notably antisocial, narcissistic, borderline, and psychopathic personality disorders (Putkonen et al., 2003; Weizmann-Henelius et al., 2003, 2004). Researchers examining "normal" personality dimensions have further illuminated a personality profile marked by emotional instability, low frustration tolerance, and high levels of impulsivity, as more characteristic of violent female offenders relative to their non-violent counterparts and to violent male offenders (Henning, Jones, & Holdford, 2003; Leenaars, 2005). Relative to non-violent women, women who behave violently may further display more antagonistic, egoistic, and competitive attitudes toward others (Henning et al., 2003; Leenaars, 2005).

Anger may also be more influential in women's violent behaviour than men's (Suter & Byrne, 2000). Incarcerated women have been found to exhibit consistently higher levels of anger compared to their male counterparts and they tend to respond with aggression to less provocation (Suter & Byrne, 2000). This finding has been theorized to be a consequence of societal norms that seek to suppress women's expression of negative traits, including anger, so that those who

experience high levels of it tend not to have had the opportunities to develop coping strategies to manage it more appropriately (Ogle et al., 1995). This reasoning is supported by the finding that incarcerated men demonstrate greater control over their anger responses than women (Suter & Byrne, 2000). The failure to develop anger management skills, combined with the high prevalence of borderline personality disorder, which is characterised by impulsive, interpersonal, and mood regulation difficulties, may greatly enhance women's likelihood of behaving violently (Gabora, Stewart, Lilley, & Allegri, in press).

Beyond personality pathology, very few psychiatric disorders have been associated with violent behaviour among adult women. Both conduct and oppositional defiant disorders are common features of violent women's psychiatric histories (John Howard Society of Alberta [JHSA], 2001; Leenaars, 2005). However, since many individuals who receive such diagnoses during their youth eventually develop antisocial personality disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2000; Robins & Price, 1991), it is plausible that it is the personality disorder that is more influential in predicting who will behave violently. Also unclear is the relationship between psychosis and violence for women, with some researchers finding psychotic disorders to be a risk factor (Krakowski & Czobor, 2004), while others have found that they actually reduce the likelihood of violence (Putkonen et al., 2003). Additionally, mood disorders such as depression have been linked to violent behaviour among adolescent females (Crick, Geiger, & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2003, as cited in Graves, 2007; McCloskey & Herrera, 2003, as cited in Graves, 2007), whereas the evidence is weaker for their role in violent behaviour among adult women, with the possible exception of women arrested for domestic violence (Henning et al., 2003). Women who behave violently in the context of intimate relationships tend to exhibit high levels of depression and posttraumatic stress disorder, often associated with their victimization histories (Adshead, 1994; Sullivan, Meese, Swan, Mazure, & Snow, 2005). Nevertheless, the high level of emotional instability noted previously among generally violent women suggests that mood problems distinguish violent and non-violent offenders and consequently, will need to be addressed in treatment with this population as well.

Suicidal ideation or previous suicide attempts also appear to place women at-risk for violence and is consistent with their difficulties regulating emotions. Several authors have reported suicide attempts to be common in violent women offenders' histories and to be more typical of violent women than men (Batchelor, 2005; Henning et al., 2003; Weizmann-Henelius et al.,

2003, 2004). Moreover, one study found that attempts at suicide were the strongest predictor of violent re-offending for this population (Blanchette & Motiuk, 1995).

The importance of substances in the commission of violent offences has been extensively documented in the literature on female offenders (Batchelor, 2005; Bell, 2004; Pollock et al., 2006; Putkonen et al., 2003; Weizmann-Henelius et al., 2003, 2004). Victim statements reinforce the involvement of substances in violent crime, with an estimated 40% of women committing violence perceived by their victims as having been under the influence of drugs or alcohol at the time of the offence (Greenfeld & Snell, 1999). Moreover, the risk of episodic or persistent violence is documented to be a reliable consequence of long-term substance abuse among women (Saner & Ellickson, 1996) and is a factor highly predictive of their violent recidivism (Corrado, Odgers, & Cohen, 2000; Putkonen, et al., 2003; Rettinger, 1998).

In summary, despite the overall paucity of research on risk factors for violence among women, there is a general consensus that the empirical study of female violence cannot be undertaken without devoting attention to the significant role of environmental factors in contributing to behavioural outcomes. Family experiences and broader societal factors both shape women's violent behaviour and likely interact with individual level risk factors in predicting persons at-risk for violence. This line of inquiry provides insight into the circumstances surrounding women's acts of aggression.

### **Motives and Circumstances Surrounding Women's Violence**

Although women's motives for committing violent crime can largely only be found in contemporary theories, and are most frequently suggested to be a means of surviving oppression and abuse (Kurz, 1993; Lowe & Hubbard, 1990), there is an emerging body of empirical evidence suggesting that other motives exist and that they may differ from those characteristic of their male counterparts (Ben-David, 1993; Ogle et al., 1995; Verona & Carbonell, 2000). This section focuses on these issues in cases where women are the primary instigators of violence. That is, the violence is not in retaliation or self-defence to abuse or the threat of abuse.

The *circumstances* surrounding women's violence are largely consistent with the risk factors noted previously. Specifically, low socioeconomic status, poverty, early traumatic experiences, an inability to cope with stressors, and aberrant personality styles, all comprise the context in which women are at a heightened risk of behaving violently (Batchelor, 2005; Gabora et al., in

press; Ogle et al., 1995; Pollock et al., 2006; Putkonen et al., 2003; Weizmann-Henelius et al., 2003). Moreover, the evidence to date is unequivocal in highlighting that women's violence is most likely to take place in an interpersonal context and is typically linked to substance use (Gabora et al., in press; Weizmann-Henelius et al., 2003). Gang affiliation also provides an environment conducive to violent behaviour, and this may be the case both because of the multiple risk factors for violence present among gang women, as well as violence being an adaptive strategy for self-preservation (Laidler & Hunt, 2001; Mackenzie & Johnson, 2003).

Similar to the circumstances surrounding women's violence, and intricately related to them, women's *motives* or reasons for acting violently are diverse and may differ from those of their male counterparts (Cunningham, 2000). For example, women's violence is more likely to be economically motivated and for survival purposes (Cunningham, 2000). In such circumstances, violence may sustain life on the street, assist with family finances, or help them to seek the assistance of others through the acquisition of material goods (Cunningham, 2000).

One of the areas of greatest debate, however, has been whether women use violence for instrumental purposes or as a means of achieving some other end (e.g., control, compliance). Much of the literature on this topic has found instrumentally motivated violence to be more characteristic of men's motivations, whereas women are more apt to use violence for expressive purposes or as a way of releasing accumulated tension (Campbell, 1993). The finding that violent women often self-report negative emotions arising from past victimization or violence within their family of origin (e.g., rage, unresolved grief) appears to support this view (Batchelor, 2005).

Instrumental aggression and angry aggression have also been contrasted across the genders. These comparisons have again revealed instrumental aggression to be more common among men, while angry aggression, in which injury to the other person is the main motive, tends to be more characteristic of female violence (Ben-David, 1993; Ogle et al., 1995; Verona & Carbonell, 2000). However, more recent research that has drawn comparisons between generally violent women, or those that are violent both inside and outside of intimate relationships, and women who are only violent in the context of intimate relationships suggests that generally violent females may be a subgroup particularly apt to use violence for instrumental purposes (Babcock

et al., 2003). These tend to be the most severely violent women (Babcock et al., 2003; Gabora et al., in press).

In one of the few investigations that has entailed a narrative analysis of women's motives for behaving violently, Kruttschnitt and Carbone-Lopez (2006) used a life events calendar to assess women's involvement as both victims and perpetrators of violent crime, from which 66 women provided information on 106 incidents of violence. The authors found that women's motivations generally centered around five themes, with the three most common being violence in response to others' disrespect toward them (reported by 20%), jealousy resulting from their partner's infidelity (19%), and self-defence (18%). Less common were the motives of self-help, in which women sought to obtain restitution or compensation from someone that they felt owed them, and victim precipitation, where the women did not initiate the violent encounter, but once they were immersed in the situation, their level of violence clearly exceeded that of their victim. These two motives were reported by 12% and 7% of the cases, respectively. Few women reported behaving violently in order to elicit material gain or because an argument with a partner escalated into a fight (i.e., mutual violence). Both were documented by only 4% of the women in their study.

Thus, taken together, many of the circumstances and motives surrounding violent behaviour are unique to women. Women's violence clearly takes place in a relational context and is frequently precipitated by substance abuse and difficulties managing negative emotions. Once thought to be solely characteristic of men's motives for violence, there appears to be a subgroup of women who use violence as a means of achieving control or compliance from their victim. These factors will bear important implications for programs targeting violent women.

### **Correctional Programs for Violent Women**

At the present time, very few correctional programs have been developed specifically to address the needs of violent female offenders. One gender-informed program for violent women offenders in the Netherlands has been published in the literature and is titled Emotion Control Therapy (Leenaars, 2005). Similarly, in Canada, the Spirit of a Warrior Program is the only intensive intervention targeting violence among women. However, the application of this program is limited to Aboriginal offenders whose needs differ from those of non-Aboriginal women (Dell & Boe, 2000). Other programs offered in correctional facilities across Canada have violence prevention components, but were not designed for the high-risk subgroup of violent

women who need more in-depth targeting of their violent behaviour and the accompanying negative emotional states. These programs include: Anger and Emotion Management, Sex Offender Therapy for Women, and the Intensive Treatment Program for Female Offenders. A description of these programs follows.

### ***The Netherlands Emotion Control Therapy***

Based on the premise that aggressive behaviour is learned through observation, imitation, experience and repetition, and is maintained through internal and external reinforcement, Emotion Control Therapy (ECT) was recently developed to address the needs of violent women offenders (Leenaars, 2005). This treatment was adapted from the Aggression Control Therapy designed for Dutch forensic psychiatric patients with a history of violent offences (Hornsveld, 2004). However, unlike this program, ECT gives prominence to the unique needs of women offenders. As a result, ECT pays greater attention to the emotional disturbances and emotion regulation difficulties deemed to be important contributors to women's violent offending (Leenaars, 2005).

In essence, this program is delivered in four modules, with each module being intricately linked to violent behaviour in some manner: anger management, social skills, moral reasoning, and trauma and anger replacement. Unlike many of the programs delivered by the Canadian correctional system, the last module of ECT, trauma and anger replacement, is delivered in individual sessions due to the sensitive nature of the topics discussed and the unwillingness of many offenders to self-disclose past abuse or traumatic events (Leenaars, 2005). The other three modules are delivered in group format. Given that this program has only recently been developed and implemented, no outcome evaluations have been undertaken at this time.

### ***Canadian Corrections***

#### ***Spirit of a Warrior Program***

The Spirit of a Warrior Program was adapted from a program for violent male Aboriginal offenders, and is intended to target violent Aboriginal women offenders in a culturally sensitive manner (Fortin, 2004). This program seeks to help women understand their acts of violence and the impacts of intergenerational violence on their behaviour. It also aims to improve family relations, and communication and coping skills, with the ultimate goal being to reduce or eliminate the likelihood of engaging in violent behaviour in the future (Mongrain, 2004). This



program is delivered in group format and is available at the Saskatchewan Penitentiary, the Burnaby Correctional Centre for Women, the Edmonton Institution for Women, and the Okimaw Ochi Healing Lodge. Recent outcome data suggests that the program is viewed favourably by both staff and participants, and that positive change can be achieved, most notably in the emotional domain which included more adaptive strategies for dealing with anger, greater empathy and caring, and enhanced emotional awareness (Bell & Flight, in press).

#### *Anger and Emotion Management Program*

The Anger and Emotion Management Program, offered at women's facilities across Canada, was adapted from a program designed for men and is currently being used with women who have learned to rely on violence or anger for conflict resolution (Fortin, 2004). This program is administered in group format and takes a cognitive-behavioural approach to anger reduction, teaching offenders the skills they need to manage anger and other emotions associated with violence more effectively. Importantly, the program incorporates the past experiences of women, which often involve histories of personal abuse. It also acknowledges the relational context in which most women's violent offences occur (Fortin, 2004).

#### *Sex Offender Therapy for Women*

Sex Offender Therapy for Women offenders is available at all of the women's institutions in Canada, as well as in the community (Fortin, 2004). Delivered in either group or individual sessions, this program seeks to address self-management, deviant arousal, cognitive distortions, social functioning, and empathy and victim awareness. Women are taught to identify the factors that influenced their behaviour (e.g., past victimization), high risk situations, and how to cope with and manage their risk. It is interesting that, although sexual offences are considered violent offences in the Criminal Code, the program does not include a module specific to violent behaviour.

#### *Intensive Treatment Program for Female Offenders*

Implemented at the Burnaby Correctional Centre for Women in 1998, the Intensive Treatment Program (ITP) for Female Offenders evolved in response to two programming needs for women offenders, namely violence and mental illness (Saidman & Chato-Manchik, 1998). This program encourages participants to develop insight into their behaviours, including those that are aggressive or violent, through active participation in group exercises. Deficient coping skills are

viewed as central to this program's approach to anger management training. Consequently, women are provided with more suitable and pro-social alternatives to dealing with anger. Other program targets include, but are not limited to, the following: improving communication and social skills, changing criminal attitudes, developing victim empathy, and taking responsibility for one's actions (Saidman & Chato-Manchik, 1998).

Like most of the programs for women, this intervention grew out of a modified program for violent men, with Dialectical Behaviour Therapy incorporated to address the emotion regulation difficulties commonly noted amongst women offenders. This latter therapy was initially developed to treat clients with Borderline Personality Disorder who exhibited self-injurious or suicidal behaviours (Linehan, 1993) and was not explicitly designed to deal with violent offenders or those with other personality disorders and mental illnesses (Elizabeth Fry Society, 2001). One recent evaluation of the effectiveness of ITP suggests that the program has been successful in achieving several of its stated objectives (Irving, Taylor, & Blanchette, 2002), though its ability to reduce violent behaviour remains unknown due partially to participation in the program by both violent and non-violent offenders. Including women of varying risk levels is inconsistent with the risk principle of effective correctional programming which states that the level and intensity of the intervention should be matched to offenders' risk (Andrews & Bonta, 2003). As such, a more targeted program for violent women offenders is needed.

In summary, although violence prevention and anger management have been incorporated as a component in some programs for women offenders, few intensive interventions have been specifically designed to target the needs of women who have behaved violently, particularly non-Aboriginal offenders. In light of the solid body of research indicating that the most effective correctional programs for women are gender-specific, designed to address the unique needs of women offenders (Blanchette, 2001), the extension of programs developed for male offenders to female populations remains questionable. Lastly, with but few notable exceptions (i.e., Bell & Flight, in press; Irving et al., 2002), the effectiveness of the programs that have been adapted from men for women has not been evaluated. It thus remains for future initiatives to address these issues.

## DISCUSSION

The present review sought to address risk factors for violence by women, as well as the circumstances and motives surrounding their violent behaviour to provide the foundation for a violence prevention program for this high-risk group of offenders. The dearth of research uncovered on these topics is in large part due to the fact that men continue to commit the vast majority of violent offences (Greenfeld & Snell, 1999), thereby making them the study group of interest. The prevailing idealized view of females as nurturing caregivers who lack a propensity toward violence has also impeded progress in this area (Motz, 2001). Nevertheless, a number of risk factors have consistently emerged across studies and have included factors both internal and external to the individual.

### **Who and Why?**

Studies that have addressed women's risk for violence suggest that several environmental, familial, and individual factors are implicated in their propensity toward violent behaviour. Most notably, violent women are more likely to be socially and economically marginalized (Batchelor, 2005; Campbell, 1991; Hien, 1998; Pollock et al., 2006), to have histories of trauma and victimization during their youth, and to have had dysfunctional family environments growing up, than non-violent women offenders and violent men (Babcock et al., 2003; Dekeserdy, 2000; Greenfeld & Snell, 1999; Pollock et al., 2006). Additionally, social cognitive processing deficits (Graves, 2007; MacBrayer et al., 2003), personality pathology (Henning et al., 2003; Putkonen et al., 2003; Weizmann-Henelius et al., 2003, 2004), and mood problems (Henning et al., 2003; Suter & Byrne, 2000) all appear to be more influential in women's violence risk than that of their male counterparts, and suicide attempts further distinguish these groups (Batchelor, 2005; Henning et al., 2003; Weizmann-Henelius et al., 2003, 2004). Substance abuse is a prominent risk factor for violence and is frequently involved in the commission of women's violent offences (Batchelor, 2005; Bell, 2004; Greenfeld & Snell, 1999; Pollock et al., 2006; Putkonen et al., 2003).

The risk factors that have been uncovered are valuable not only for risk prediction purposes, but also because they provide insight into the circumstances surrounding women's violent behaviour. It is interesting then that very little is known about why women aggress. The limited inquiry in this area suggests that women's violence takes place in an interpersonal context and that their motives extend beyond the commonly held view that their violence is spurred primarily in

self-defence (Hamberger & Polente, 1994; Henning et al., 2003). Women may behave violently for financial reasons (Cunningham, 2000; Gabora et al., in press), as a way of releasing accumulated tension (Batchelor, 2005; Campbell, 1993), to injure another person (Ben-David, 1993; Ogle et al., 1995; Verona & Carbonell, 2000), or to achieve control, compliance, or retribution from them (Babcock et al., 2003). Overall, both the risk factors and motives that contribute to women's risk for violence have the potential to inform the development of a program specifically designed to meet this group's unique needs.

### **A Woman-Centered Approach to Violent Offender Programming**

To date, few violence prevention programs have been developed for female offenders in Canada and abroad. The only program focused explicitly on addressing this need in a Canadian context is limited to violent Aboriginal women offenders, a group whose needs differ considerably from those of their non-Aboriginal counterparts (Dell & Boe, 2000). Moreover, various other programs that have been used with women were originally designed for men. Hence, they may have limited value when applied to women offenders. Best practice guidelines stipulate the importance of women-centered, gender-informed programs in order to optimize outcomes (Berman, 2005; Blanchette & Brown, 2006; Bloom, Owen, & Covington, 2003; Maule, 2007). These factors, in conjunction with the growing number of violent women offenders outlined at the outset of this review, underscore the urgent need for a violence prevention program targeting this population in Canada. This need is particularly great for non-Aboriginal women who commit violent crimes.

Of importance for programming efforts, several of the risk factors and motives for violence identified are highly dynamic (i.e., changeable) in form. As such, they should form focal points of intervention for this population. Mood problems, suicide attempts, and substance abuse suggest that violent women as a group have poorly developed coping skills (Ogle et al., 1995), and a number of researchers have identified social cognitive processes (i.e., attribution biases) to be implicated in female violence (Babcock et al., 2003; Leschied et al., 2001). Teaching more effective stress and emotion management skills may reduce their emotional instability, as well as their reliance on substances as a means of coping with negative affective states. Since women's violence is most likely to take place in a relational context, training in interpersonal, conflict resolution, and negotiation skills will be equally important to address. Moreover, having women identify their reasons for behaving violently can provide them with insight into their actions.

Finally, sessions on cognitive restructuring techniques and anger control tactics may facilitate more long-term behavioural change.

There is ample evidence that women who are victimized often become victimizers themselves, thereby underscoring the importance of examining their violence within their own victimization histories (Graves, Sechrist, White, & Paradise, 2005; Saunders, 2002; Swan & Snow, 2002). The available programs developed for violent women offenders emphasize the importance of incorporating individual therapy into treatment regimes to discuss these topics due to their sensitive nature and an unwillingness of many women to self-disclose in groups (see Leenaars, 2005).

Although the relative stability of personality traits by adulthood has long been a hotly debated topic, the empirical evidence to date indicates that the balance is tipped in favour of dispositional stability (McCrae & Costa, 1990; Roberts & DelVecchio, 2000; Terracciano, Costa, & McCrae, 2006). The literature reviewed herein nevertheless underscores that dispositional characteristics are important in understanding women's violent behaviour, and that they are intricately linked to their repertoire of coping skills and may interact with environmental influences in predicting violent outcomes (Ogle et al., 1995). As such, rather than attempt to change offenders' personality style in an effort to achieve behavioural change, personality could be used to provide insight into the individual's strengths and weaknesses, thereby illuminating treatment targets and the most appropriate strategies for intervention. Such offender-treatment matching lies at the core of the principle of responsivity, one of the fundamental principles underlying effective correctional programming (Andrews & Bonta, 2003).

Two final considerations for a violence prevention program for women involve taking a holistic approach to treatment and ensuring that care is continued upon their return to the community (Batchelor, 2005). More specifically, programs serving violent women must take into account women's status in a gendered society (Batchelor, 2005). While these women share some of the same problems as their male counterparts, women's difficulties are often a result of their status as females, especially when it comes to occupational inequality, their lack of vocational opportunities, and victimization experiences. Thus, ensuring the provision of, and/or access to, services addressing trauma, employment, education, and housing needs, will be important, particularly for women of low socioeconomic status. Lastly, to maximize the likelihood that

these women will continue to desist from violent crime, a continuum of care approach will be vital (Batchelor, 2005). This will ease the transition of violent women from confinement to the community. A holistic approach will remain important throughout this transitional phase and should address the social, cultural, and familial context into which they will be, or are being, released. Significant mental health concerns among this population make it imperative that personal and emotional needs are targeted as well.

## **CONCLUSION**

What is striking from this overview of women and violence is the clear need for a violence prevention program for women offenders. It is well documented that the pathways leading to violent crime differ across the genders (Graves, 2007; Maule, 2007) and, consequently, the most effective correctional programs will likely be those that take women's unique circumstances and needs into consideration. Women who are violent in the community are at a heightened risk of behaving violently while incarcerated (Skopp, Edens, & Ruiz, 2007) and tend to recidivate at high rates, particularly shortly after their release (Putkonen et al., 2003). Women with a violent index offence also have a higher likelihood of re-offending violently (Gobeil & Barrett, in press). As such, streamlining these women into a violence prevention program early in their sentence and ensuring that this care is continued upon their release, will be important contributing factors to achieving CSC's priorities of fostering a safe and secure institutional environment and the safe transition of offenders into the community.

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