DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN THE CARIBBEAN - ISSUES AND CHALLENGES IN THE EVALUATION OF PREVALENCE

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Domestic violence is a phenomenon that has plagued family settings in almost every geo-cultural region of the world. It constitutes a scourge that has transcended countless epochs and has created scenarios that have provoked a wide cross-section of interpretations ranging from social acceptance to social rejection. In one sense, domestic violence is a phenomenon that is predicated "anomie" in the context of a social relationship between at least two individuals within a "domestic group". Such an interpretation would suggest that social relations are functional if they can be sustained by an understanding and appreciation of relationships and roles, and a capacity to embrace harmonious behavioural patterns in the face of deregulation that could result from a breakdown in the extent to which social relationships and roles are understood and appreciated. In another sense, one may embrace a more contentious position and claim that domestic violence is functional. In popular everyday discourse, this seems to be a common position that is adopted not only by men and women but also, victims and perpetrators. In the eyes of countless males, domestic violence is perceived to be an act ensuring a kind of resource allocation that translates into power and thus, permits the persistence of patriarchal systems that might be steeped in tradition. Several women, on the other hand, have been known to justify their victimization and that of other women on the basis of emotion and economics, both of which, are linked to the persistence of patriarchal systems as a medium to avert "anomie". While these positions are valid, domestic violence ought to be a concern for the myriad institutional entities that mix and combine to determine the social structure in any given national setting. In particular, government agencies and non-governmental organizations have critical roles to play in this regard.

Notwithstanding individuals' conceptions of the impact of domestic violence within their specific personal or group setting, institutional entities such as government and non-government agencies ought to take note of adverse effects that are due to domestic violence and as a result, become manifest in a manner that jeopardizes the social fabric within national settings. In addition, the experience of domestic violence during childhood is likely to impact negatively upon children's prospective interface with relatives whenever domestic situations arise at later stages in the life cycle. For instance, there is evidence to suggest that individuals are more likely to be perpetrators or victims of domestic violence, the greater their exposure to domestic violence within their primary group settings during their childhood. In recent times, the scourge of domestic violence has hit centre-stage becoming a primary focus for government attention in its quest to secure national interests. From the standpoint of the government in its capacity as a medium through which meaningful and effective governance is administered, domestic violence is considered to be anomic insofar as it is a product as well as a contributor to growing deregulation and disorder in society. Thus, there should be a wide range of research questions pertaining to the efforts of government agencies and non-government organizations as they strive to formulate, implement, monitor and evaluate their interventions to effect change. The answers to such questions should be derived empirically based upon qualitative and quantitative
There have been recent studies examining domestic violence in the context of Caribbean societies. This attests to the critical nature of the situation. Moreover, international fora such as the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, Egypt and the 1996 Women and Development Conference in Beijing, China reinforced the crisis that is characterized by domestic violence in primary group settings around the world. In Trinidad and Tobago, efforts toward the collection of data on the incidence and prevalence of domestic violence have gained momentum, though disparate agencies have embarked upon the task relying upon different standards and seeking to serve their group-specific needs. On February 26, 1999, the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago under the auspices of the Gender Affairs Division of the Ministry of Culture and Gender Affairs convened a roundtable to discuss data collection and presentation as they relate to domestic violence as a national social problem. Several key agencies including the government, non-government organizations and the University of the West Indies were represented. Not surprisingly, one of the primary objectives was the promotion of a standardized system of data collection on the victims of domestic violence nationwide. It is believed that similar processes have been unfolding in other countries of the Caribbean sub-region.

In order to treat effectively with efforts to provide answers to the range of questions akin to social problems linked to domestic violence, reliable and valid indicators of status and change are critical. However, current processes of conceptualization and data gathering limit the extent to which such indicators can be meaningfully generated to provide answers to the broad range of questions. Overcoming this challenge is a critical objective in the realm of policy-relevant research and in particular, the kind that will contribute to the formulation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of interventions that are mounted to treat not only with domestic violence but also, the wider cross-section of social ills associated with it. The rest of the paper is an attempt to throw light upon emergent issues and challenges that ought to be entertained in order to improve the quality of indicators pertinent to domestic violence in Caribbean societies.

Conceptual Issues

Conceptually, domestic violence is an elusive concept. In seeking to explain relationships that fall within the scope of domestic violence, there ought to be some meaningful approach toward a definition. Domestic violence has been defined in several ways. For example, in a recent Training and Information Manual for Community Educators, domestic violence was defined as follows:

Any violence that takes place in or outside the home between family and household members or partners in existing or previous relationships. It can include mental/emotional, sexual and physical violence (James, 1997).
Definitions have also been advanced for the different dimensions of domestic violence. For instance, domestic violence that assumes the form of physical abuse is reflected in behaviour such as pushing, shoving, hitting, beating, torture and murder. Domestic violence assuming the form of sexual abuse refers to any form of non-consensual sexual activity such as unwanted sexual fondling, rape and incest. The third dimension of domestic violence is captured in a 1993 Canadian National Action Plan. It assumes the form of emotional abuse which refers to a range of tactics to deflate an individual’s self-confidence including insults, jeers and abusive language. It includes the use of threats of physical violence or isolation, the deliberate withholding of emotional support, incessant infidelity and the control of all social relationships. Except for sexual abuse, the nature of the other forms of domestic violence is elusive and subject to variations in interpretations across individual assuming exposure to the same stimulus. For instance, in a recently concluded roundtable discussion, Dr. Rhoda Reddock noted that “what men call emotional violence is not what women call emotional violence”.

This raises a number of questions about counting cases, victims, perpetrators and domestic settings, all of which, permit one to assess different dimensions of domestic violence. It might be important to question the extent to which cases had not been reported due to denial on the part of victims or perpetrators. More important, it is important to determine whether or not, distinct patterns emerge to throw light upon the mix of interpretive responses that are likely to be associated with various characteristics of victims and perpetrators. This could be of tremendous value in facilitating processes to assess the quality of the data used to furnish indicators of the incidence and prevalence of domestic violence. Perhaps, experimental processes combining quantitative and qualitative inputs could provide a systematic basis for addressing such a concern. The domestic setting hinges upon the concept of a “domestic group” which may transcend the bounds of the family or household unit. Therefore, it will be important to ascertain the extent to which this could be the case or should domestic violence be strictly confined to family and household units.

Enumerating Domestic Violence

In order to gather data that are indicative of the incidence and prevalence of domestic violence, a prime concern is to determine the various units that are likely to be used for tapping various dimensions of this elusive phenomenon. The paper identifies four different units of analysis: the victim, the perpetrator, the case (i.e. a specific experience that is tantamount to exposure to domestic violence) and the domestic setting. For each unit, a number of characteristics and other attributes can be obtained through a variety of data collection methods. Having identified the units of analysis, a process of enumeration provides a basis for determining incidence and prevalence in each instance. In the context of Trinidad and Tobago, the count is based upon visits to the Domestic Violence Hot Line and other entities such as shelters that provide a place of refuge for battered persons. Other potential sources of data are the Police, the Probation Unit of the Ministry of Social Development, Youth and Sport, and the Rape Crisis Centre, all of which are capable of providing data on visits or reported cases. Some cases are also captured through reports made via the medium of the telephone. In principle, the data strive to paint a picture that accurately reflects the underlying structure of domestic violence under conditions in which a complete
population-count has been undertaken for each of the four units of analyses. In practice, this is never achieved since reported cases may, in most instances, misrepresent actual population counts due to non-coverage and in some cases, item non-response. Where cases have not been captured due to non-coverage or item non-response, parameters of interest could be biased threatening the validity of the magnitudes associated with indicators of interest.

Theoretically, survey sampling provides a basis for drawing inferences about population parameters. However, the sensitive nature of domestic violence as an area of systematic inquiry militates against the use of scientific survey sampling as a means of collecting data. Other methods such as in-depth interviewing often rely upon survey methods that are highly likely to bias selection, not only as a result of the process but also because there are constraints in terms of the number of interviewees. While there are notable limitations in using Hot Lines, shelters, the police and the Probation Unit to gather data on domestic violence, they still appear to be the most feasible media through which such data are gathered. In order to enhance the quality of indicators on domestic violence, data collection processes should strive to recognize the nature of the bias due to non-coverage and eliminate it. Since these processes are inherently attempts to undertake population counts, innovative strategies capable of reducing non-coverage and item non-response should be embraced. While different institutions may have a specific set of concerns of relevance to domestic violence, there should be a core set that should be standardized and hence, operationalized using items for which there have been rigorous assessments of validity.

Data Collection and Reliability

The sensitive nature of domestic violence suggests that confidentiality is a prime virtue that will enhance data quality. The most commonly used media for gathering data on domestic violence are visits and telephone calls to the various sites. Both involve contact between the victim or perpetrator on one hand and an interviewer on the other - an arrangement that is often perceived as indiscreet among the members of specific sub-populations. It has been reported that visits/calls have been positively associated with increased advertising of counseling and related services. Therefore, response rates might be increased by creating greater awareness, through advertising, of the services offered by the Domestic Violence Hot Line, the Rape Crisis Centre and shelters for battered persons. This is predicated upon the notion that persons in violent situations need help and will solicit it providing that they have knowledge of its accessibility. In addition, the different sites could take advantage of advances in information technology by acquiring electronic mail facilities and setting up web sites, both of which provide another set of media through which victims and perpetrators could seek assistance and at the same time, fulfill the data requirements to approximate a more complete coverage of the incidence and prevalence of domestic violence. There is likely to be some merit in such an undertaking given phenomenal increases in the use of information technologies, especially among more affluent sub-populations. Since there is speculation that disproportionately low coverage exists among the members of such populations, greater access to information technologies might improve the situation. In this regard, confidentiality and in particular, the prospect of security breaches are prime concerns. In general,
however, processes of verification ought to be put in place to vouch for the veracity and reliability of reports.

**DATA INPUTS AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE**

**Toward Indicators of Incidence and Prevalence**

A complete assessment of domestic violence is based upon the collection of data pertaining to the four principal units of analysis: the victim, the perpetrator, the case and the domestic situation. Whether reference is made to incidence or prevalence depends upon the unit being analyzed. While prevalence is applicable only with respect to the case (i.e. an act of domestic violence), the concepts of incidence and prevalence are applicable with respect to the victim, the perpetrator and the domestic setting. To be more specific, prevalence hinges upon an existing count with a given characteristic at a given point in time as opposed to incidence that hinges upon the stock exhibiting the characteristic in question for the first time. It is also worth noting that sophisticated statistical databases have to be developed and managed to permit analyses of life histories, especially in the cases of the victim, the perpetrator and the domestic setting. For each unit, the following sections itemize the data that should be collected to facilitate the development of indicators of incidence and prevalence with regard to domestic violence. They include a core set of data on ascriptive attributes and life histories that reflect changes in achieved attributes over time. The latter should permit the collection of data quantitatively as well as qualitatively. Generally, the implementation of such a data retrieval and storage capability constitutes a formidable challenge, not to mention, individuals capacity to manipulate and analyze the data statistically.

**The Victim/Perpetrator**

**Demographics** - Age, Sex, Ethnicity, Religion, Exposure to Violence familial, Frequency of Violence (i.e. inflicted upon others vicariously or otherwise), Format of Violence,

**Timing** - Characteristics of the Victim (e.g. marital status, occupational status, educational status, religion, headship status, disability status, family/household structure, relationship to perpetrator, frequency of personal exposure.

**Timing** - Characteristics of the Perpetrator (e.g. marital status, occupational status, educational status, religion, headship status, family/household structure, relationship to victim).

**Timing** - Social Relationships between the Victim and the Perpetrator with respect to marital status, occupational status, educational status, religion, headship status, dependency status between perpetrator and victim, the nature of the dependency.

**Timing** - Place of Residence, Nature of Violence (e.g. physical, sexual, emotional/mental), Perceived Motive for Violence, Location of Act (e.g. work place, recreational ground, entertainment centre, commercial enterprise, streets, home), Nature of Injury (only in the case of victims), Notify Police (only in the case of
victims), Response of Police (only in the case of victims), Knowledge of Support Systems (only in the case of victims).

**The Domestic Setting**

- **Timing** - Characteristics of the Setting (e.g. household structure, household size, age composition, sex composition, ethnic composition, socio-economic status, sex of household head, overcrowding status).

- **Timing** - Social Relationships between the Victim and the Perpetrator with respect to gender, age, the interaction of gender and age, occupational status, educational status, familial/household relationship between victim and perpetrator, dependency status between perpetrator and victim, the nature of the dependency.

- **Timing** - Frequency of Occurrence, Location of Domestic Setting, Nature of Violence (e.g. physical, sexual, emotional/mental), Perceived Motive for Violence, Location of Act (e.g. work place, recreational ground, entertainment centre, commercial enterprise, streets, home), Nature of Injury (only in the case of victims), Notify Police (only in the case of victims), Response of Police.

**The Case**

- **Victim/Perpetrator Characteristics** - Age, Sex, Ethnicity, Occupational Status, Educational Status, Headship Status, Disability Status, Marital Status, Union Status.

- **Perpetrator-Victim Characteristics** - Age, Sex, Interaction of Age and Sex, Dependency Status, the Nature of the Dependency, Occupational Status, Educational Status.

- **Characteristics of the Case** - Date and Time of Occurrence, Notification of Police, Notification of Hot Line or Other Support System, Reason for Decisions to notify Specific Authorities, Response of Specific Authorities, Location of Domestic Setting in which the Act has occurred, Nature of Violence (e.g. physical, sexual, emotional/mental), Perceived Motive for Violence, Location of Act (e.g. work place, recreational ground, entertainment centre, commercial enterprise, streets, home), Nature of Injury to Victim.

**SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

There is a great deal of speculation associated with the view that the incidence and prevalence of domestic violence is increasing in the Caribbean Region. At the same time, indicators of such a phenomenon are either unreliable or non-existent. Due to public outcry, greater sensitization on the part of those geared toward fostering a greater gender sensibility and the graphic character of outcomes of domestic violence as witnessed in countries such as Trinidad and Tobago, there is a growing recognition of domestic violence as a public scourge that should be redressed through a reliance upon systematically conceived social interventions. It is in this regard that data collection becomes important especially in cases where specific data items are needed to permit the assessment of incidence and prevalence of domestic violence in the
context of different analytical units including victims and perpetrators. This paper attempts to highlight a set of concerns and challenges that have to be overcome to adequately meet the objectives of data collection. While it is based primarily upon experiences in Trinidad and Tobago, it may also be used heuristically in other Caribbean settings. The paper has highlighted challenges that are akin to conceptual concerns, enumeration, data collection and reliability, and the retrieval, storage and management of databases. It has thrown light upon prospective input data that could feature in the development of suitable indicators of incidence and prevalence with regard to domestic violence within the Caribbean region.

Particular reference has been made to four units of analysis: the victim, the perpetrator, the case and the domestic setting. These are important insofar as descriptive and prescriptive statements have invariably focused upon these entities. For instance, in a recent roundtable discussion on domestic violence, it was stated that peak period of calls to a Domestic Violence Hot Line have been evident in post-festive periods (e.g. Christmas and Carnival). This could be gleaned from an analysis of cases and is worthwhile insofar as it could provide answers to concerns regarding the need to prepare individuals to treat with problems that may arise during festive and post-festive periods. During the same meeting, reference was made to the view that men are violent toward women when the latter is most dependent upon male support especially during the childbearing stages of their lives. This is a hypothesis worthy of testing and this could only be accomplished based upon the collection of data that focus upon the victim as a unit of analysis. There is also another concern that men abuse women in order to attain sexual control - a view that could also be tested on the basis of a similar process. It is expected that the data on perpetrators are the most problematic insofar as they constitute a highly elusive sub-population. Nonetheless, there have been reports of potential abusers who contacted various support systems for assistance. In conclusion, the thoughts expressed in this paper constitute a first effort to treat with the problem of developing noteworthy indicators of the incidence and prevalence of domestic violence and as such, are indicative of a process that is novel to the Caribbean Region.