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### Defending Battered Women in the Public Sphere

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#### **Abstract**

This commentary draws upon the work of feminist media scholars and those who study the strategies of men's rights activists to reflect upon the media and men's rights reaction to the publication of the author's book on battered women who kill. The parallels between the responses from these two sources prompt the author to make suggestions as to how the men's rights materials might be used to enable more productive media engagement by feminist authors.

#### **Keywords**

Battered women; women's equality; feminist media studies; men's rights.

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## Introduction

The release of my book, *Defending Battered Women on Trial: Lessons from the Transcripts*, generated a media storm of controversy. The publisher, a university press, had never seen anything like it. I anticipated media interest because my book focused on the murder trials of women who killed their batterers. Husband-killing is relatively rare and therefore considered 'newsworthy'. I also expected attack by anti-feminist columnists who vent against 'victim feminism' (Wolf 1993: 135) and decry women's violence against men as a crisis.

What I had not been prepared for was media distortion of my work and, more disconcertingly, personal attacks. I also had not considered the response of men's rights activists. I knew of their extremist tactics with respect to feminists working on family law issues, but I was unaware of their more recent penchant for attacking individual feminists who work to end male violence against women (Gotell and Dutton 2016).

Once I was exposed to the men's rights vitriol about my book, I noticed an uncanny parallel between their claims and the frameworks selected by media to discuss my book. In fact, the men's rights attacks allowed me to make sense of my interactions with mainstream media and prompted me to consider men's rights rhetoric as a way of anticipating and engaging journalists, editors and commentators. I also discovered that, in one case at least, the media *was* the men's rights movement.

I therefore use my experience as a modest case study to explore the insights of not only scholars who have analyzed media coverage of feminist advocacy but also those who have studied men's movements. The following three questions structure my discussion: Why is it important to defend battered women in the public sphere of media? What are the challenges to doing so effectively? What are the themes and strategies of 'men's rights' discourses deployed to distort feminist knowledge and advocacy around battered women's issues? In my conclusion I reflect on how this case study might improve our ability to anticipate and respond to men's rights strategies of targeting public feminists and to engage publicly and constructively with the media on battered women's behalf.

## The importance of defending battered women publicly

My book originates in my long-term commitment to improving access to justice for battered women. Although I was writing on legal and strategic issues for battered women earlier (Sheehy 1987), the 1990 Supreme Court of Canada decision in *R v Lavallee* galvanized my interest in the area. This case changed the law of self-defence for battered women on trial for homicide of their male partners in three ways.

First, the Court held that the lack of 'imminent' harm posed by the threatener would no longer bar self-defence (*R v Lavallee* [1990] 1 SCR 852: 883). Second, the Court clarified that the right to self-defence does not impose a 'duty to retreat' before using lethal force. (*R v Lavallee* [1990] 1 SCR 852: 888-889). Third, the Court ruled that 'Battered Woman Syndrome' evidence may be used to dispel erroneous but widely held misconceptions about wife battering and to show the reasonableness of a woman's beliefs regarding the danger she faced and her options (*R v Lavallee* [1990] 1 SCR 852: 890).

It was a stunning ruling, unanimous in the result and written by Canada's first woman justice of the Supreme Court. But the question remained: would this reformed law of self-defence really make a difference for battered women on trial?

I investigated the cases of women who killed male partners in the period 1990-2005, to assess the impact of the *Lavallee* decision. I used newspaper and legal database searches to find 91 cases that explicitly or implicitly raised self-defence; I ordered 36 transcripts from these cases;

and I undertook legal and secondary source research to mine the transcripts. The data provided a context in which I analyze the cases of 11 women in detail, 10 who killed and 1 who did not.

I use the transcripts to examine themes such as forms of expert testimony (Battered Woman Syndrome, Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and Coercive Control); risk factors for intimate femicide like strangulation; the pressures to plead guilty to manslaughter rather than go on to trial for murder; the role of colonization and systemic racism in Aboriginal women's homicide trials; the question of whether psychological abuse can ground self-defence; wife abuse as torture; and alternate defences like provocation, intoxication, and automatism, among many other issues.

My book's Conclusion offers recommendations for law reform, prosecutorial discretion, best practices for defence lawyers, and the institutional changes needed to enable battered women to escape with their lives and begin again. One of my more contentious recommendations is that battered women should be charged with manslaughter, not murder, consistent with charge screening protocols where there is no reasonable prospect of conviction, and to alleviate the unfair pressure on women to plead guilty even when they have valid self-defence claims.

As I reviewed the media that surrounded these women's cases, I noticed the disconnect between the social, political and economic structures that shape battered women's lives and choices and how, when they kill, their murder trials are reported for public consumption. Accounts of women's homicide trials were framed by themes regarding the alleged rise in women's violence and women 'getting away with murder' (Hum 1998; *Winnipeg Free Press* 1986). The evidence presented, the arguments made, and the legal results were at times misrepresented in the media (*National Post* 1998; *Ottawa Citizen* 2001; Wente 2001). Overwhelmingly, battered women's accounts of male violence and police failure to protect women were portrayed as exceptional and individual, not systemic, problems. With rare exceptions (Macaluso 1992; MacQueen 1991), reporting focused on the specific facts in women's trials without discussing the larger context or the barriers women face in leaving violent men.

Worse still, some media actively targeted the woman on trial. Virulent media dogged Lilian Getkate during and after her 1995 Ottawa murder trial, using gendered descriptors and inflammatory headlines (Sheehy 2014a: 237-242). The *Ottawa Citizen* expressed outrage when Getkate, convicted of manslaughter not murder by her jury, received a compassionate sentence from her judge. It editorialized in a misleading manner about the legal basis for the jury's and the judge's decisions (*Ottawa Citizen* 1998). Other papers reported on Getkate's reunion with her children, calling her a 'killer mom' (*The [Vancouver] Province* 1998). A radio host denounced 'feminazis' as responsible for the Getkate outcome and claimed that women were encouraged to plug their husbands' heads with bullets (Canadian Broadcast Standards Council 1999).

Reading such hysterical media prompted me to change course from writing a strictly academic book. Instead I aimed my book at the reading public and strove to present women's homicide transcripts in an engaging manner. I knew that the backlash against the 'abuse excuse' is framed by bold reversals and abetted by our societal preference to minimize or speak vaguely about 'women's experience of abuse' (Romito 2008). I therefore quoted extensively from the transcripts to document these realities vividly.

I knew this decision would require me to defend my book and battered women in the media. Don Butler of the *Ottawa Citizen* wrote the first article under the title 'Battered women entitled to kill abusers' (Butler 2013). That headline set my telephones at home and at work ringing and flooded my inbox with emails. Over the next 10 days I did 15 interviews, including an LA talk show, Canada's national radio CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation), and national television.<sup>1</sup> I published two opinion pieces that appeared in papers across the nation (Sheehy

2013a, 2013b) and one letter to the editor (Sheehy 2014b). My book was the subject of four columns in the *National Post* (Jonas 2013; Kay 2013b, 2013c; Urback 2014), a second column in the *Ottawa Citizen* (Kennedy 2013) and, somewhat later, the topic for two feminist radio shows, a feminist blog, a feminist magazine, and a number of positive book reviews. (*Blogging for Equality* 2014; Cairns Way 2014; Craig 2014; Cunliffe 2015; *Feminist Current* 2014; *The Third Wave* 2014; Tremblay 2014).<sup>2</sup>

I should not have been surprised by the media frenzy that unfolded from the *Ottawa Citizen* headline. Yet I was profoundly confused by what media said I said. I could not understand why 'moral justification' was the media focus and why journalists insisted on discussing 'abused men' when my book was about abused women. I was also surprised to find myself cast as a pariah. Given that I was describing the gap between what the law had long ago promised in 1990 and current prosecutorial practices, the suggestion that my message was radical baffled me. I was debased as an 'ideologue' making a 'bizarre plea' in a national – albeit arch-conservative – newspaper (Kay 2013a).

### **The challenges of defending battered women in the media**

Many layers of difficulty confront a feminist who speaks in defence of battered women to the media. Women, particularly feminists, have limited access to the media. Even when generous media access is afforded, as it was to me, women encounter widespread devaluation of their voices and incur sex-specific costs for public speech. Further, the structural and ideological constraints of media blunt and distort our messages.

Women journalists and columnists have made strides in Canada, accounting for 45 per cent of senior newsgatherers, producing 42 per cent of news reports, and occupying governance and top-management positions in media at between 26.3 and 55.1 per cent (Rauhala, Lindgren and Fatima 2012: 4, 5). Yet as subjects of news, women are under-represented at 30 per cent. Women journalists are assigned only 37 per cent of crime stories and 34 per cent of politics and government stories; women are experts or spokespeople in only 29 per cent of stories (Rauhala, Lindgren and Fatima 2012: 3, 4, 6). Even in Sweden, where increased numbers of women have assumed editorial authority, 'these advances in women's status are not reflected in news content, which is still male-dominated and marginalizes women's representation and issues related to gender equality' (Edström 2013: 78). Further, few journalists write in a feminist voice, given the professional imperative of 'neutrality' (Chunn 2007: 55).

What this means for defending battered women in the media is that there may be few journalists or hosts willing or able to engage in an informed manner with feminist research, specifically that on battered women. This situation has been exacerbated by the dismantling of the federal government's Family Violence Initiative (FVI) online library by the Conservative government in 2011. As a result, thousands of reports and studies previously easily available have disappeared, as have more complex analyses of male violence against women, including the role of women's inequality (Mann 2016). Thus, only 12 per cent of news articles situate intimate femicide as domestic violence even though 'proper contextualization is necessary for educating the general public about the role of domestic violence as a precursor to femicide' (Gillespie, Richards, Givens et al. 2013: 238).

Furthermore, women who take up public space are targets for attacks meant to silence, discredit and demoralize. Mary Beard reports that women are 30 times more likely than men to be targeted for vitriol and that men are the overwhelming majority of perpetrators. (Beard 2014: 11) She argues that the ancient literature of the Greeks and Romans shows that 'to become a *man* ... was to claim the right to speak. Public speech was a – if not *the* – defining attribute of maleness. A woman speaking in public was, in most circumstances, by definition not a woman' (Beard 2014: 11). For example, in Sweden, women journalists are more likely to

receive sexualized threats and hate speech (Löfgren Nilsson 2013, cited in Edström 2016: 4) from 'middle-aged men from all segments of society ... united in their hatred of feminism and feminists' (Edström 2016: 5, citing Expressen/Researchgruppen 2013, Researchgruppen 2013).

The organizational and format constraints of media together with their professional ideologies also muted and distorted my messages. Many scholars have analyzed the structure, ownership and ideological biases of media as they affect access to justice. Among these, Dorothy Chunn's content analysis of depictions in the news of feminist aspirations and advocacy was most helpful in reflecting on my experience (Chunn 2007).

Chunn shows how depictions of feminists and their equality struggles, shaped by media's constraints of time and profitability and journalism's ideologies of 'newsworthiness' and 'objectivity', fit within liberal tenets that a) focus on individual women rather than the social context from which they emerge; b) frame issues using the adversarial model that posits 'truth' as somewhere in the middle of two extremes, with feminism cast as one 'extreme'; and c) represent equality as formal equality – or treating likes alike – with consequent attacks upon substantive equality claims. All of these constraints affected my ability to communicate with nuance and clarity through the media.

This first hurdle I faced is that, for the media to make a 'newsworthy' story out of a quasi-academic book like mine, particularly under the pressure to sell news, journalists need a hook, an idea that will attract or inflame a reader. This meant journalists looked for the most controversial thing I may have said, or extrapolated generously and claimed I said something I did not.

Don Butler's lede, 'Battered women are morally entitled to kill their abusive partners, even those who are passed out or asleep, says a respected University of Ottawa law professor' (Butler 2013), dismayed me. It sensationalized my recommendations without reference to either my data or the chapters recounting women's homicide trials that support them. Yet Butler's provocative piece gave me broad media access, and the ensuing controversy resulted in the hardcover edition of my book being sold out months ahead of schedule.

But a second related hurdle was that the vast majority of journalists, commentators and radio and TV hosts did not read my book or absorb the ideas I discuss. The organizational constraint of time meant that, for better or worse, the Conclusion of my book was where the bulk of the media attention started and ended. The journalists who swamped me with calls and emails were even less informed than Butler. They had not even read my Conclusion: they had only read what Butler said I said. This meant that I was caught in a time warp whereby I was repeatedly asked to defend Butler's lede sentence.

The third hurdle – the liberal focus of mainstream media on individual women rather than broader, systemic women's issues – was related to the other two. As Chunn shows, the individualization of women's claims in the media both simplifies and decontextualizes complex political arguments. But because journalists had not read my book, they were unable to focus on an individual woman's story. Instead I – and my outrageous claim – became the story. Thus *National Post* columnist Barbara Kay asked: 'how can a faculty of law endorse such intellectual corruption in their classrooms?' (Kay 2013c).

My challenge was thus how to defend my book from attacks by people who had not read it with respect to things I did not say and do not believe. I started every radio interview by stating that I could not pronounce on whether battered women are 'morally justified' because I am not an expert in ethics but rather in law. Over and over I told them yes, women may be legally 'justified' in killing their abusers, even those who are asleep, because the Supreme Court of Canada said so in 1990. My answers perplexed journalists. They asked me, if this is old news, why is everyone

up in arms about your book? Indeed. The premises of the *Lavallee* decision have become contentious 25 years later.

The adversarial model for journalistic truth-telling that Chunn describes – my fourth hurdle – contrasts ‘good feminists’ with ‘bad feminists’. Bad feminists make ‘equality demands that seriously threaten the status quo’ and ‘insist that the implementation of equality requires the privileged to relinquish some or all of their privilege’ (Chunn 2007: 47). Thus, although my analysis and recommendations were firmly grounded in the law, in a wealth of social science research and in recommendations made by a judge who reviewed the homicide convictions of 98 women who claimed to have killed their abusers in self-defence (Ratushny 1997), I was characterized as making extraordinary claims and advocating for a ‘right to kill’ (CTV 2013). Barbara Kay declared:

It takes an ideologue to believe: that women who stay with abusive men are perfectly normal people who happen to be victims of a sadist rather than psychologically challenged human beings; that women would never lie in court about how serious the abuse they suffered was before they killed; and that women are the only victims of serious partner abuse. (Kay 2013b; online)

Journalists, columnists and hosts focused on the rare case – women who kill sleeping batterers (Maguigan 1991) – and decried the ‘slippery slope’ on which I was embarking. My recommendations could create a ‘dangerous precedent’ (*The Current* 2013), give license to vigilantism (*The Current* 2013), and ‘open the door to misdeeds from slander to murder’. (Jonas 2013) Some asked whether women might have an incentive to fabricate or exaggerate abuse (*The Current* 2013). Others asserted that this outcome is inevitable:

With the partner dead, there is nobody to dispute the woman’s narrative of events or assessment of actual threat to life. To anyone who understands human nature, it’s a slippery slope, opening the door to killings of non- or mildly abusive male partners in the name of equality, prompted by hatred, revenge, financial opportunism, jealousy or any other strong emotion. (Kay 2013b)

I was most surprised when the CBC’s show, hosted by Anna Maria Tremonti, actively searched for a ‘feminist’ who would ‘disagree’ with me. They did find a feminist to do so: a family lawyer who has worked with battered women. But she had not read my book either and therefore relied on the misrepresentations being repeated – that is, that I was encouraging women to kill their abusers. She accused me of condoning homicide and failing to focus on the important issues around assisting women to flee to safety. This was a false portrayal of my book and sadly another instance of misinformation manufactured by media.

My fifth hurdle that Chunn warns about – the privileging of formal equality over substantive equality – was implicit in many questions asked of me. This privileging means that structured inequality remains invisible and intact. Competing claims from feminists and the counter-movements dedicated to rolling back equality gains are presented as equally legitimate, casting feminism as ‘just one interest group among many’ (Chunn 2007: 50). For example, I was asked in almost every interview whether my recommendations applied to ‘battered men’.

Leaving aside the fact that journalists would not keep even extremely short conversations focused on battered women, such questions demand sophisticated answers that attend to systemic inequalities. For example, do men who have been assaulted by female partners also experience ‘battering’ or ‘coercive control’? Are they socially entrapped by poverty, the need to protect children or the fear of being hunted down and killed? Furthermore, the insistence on raising the concerns of ‘battered men’ is not neutral: rather it is the program of men’s rights

activists dedicated to reversing the gains of the battered women's movement (Dragiewicz and DeKeseredy 2012).

And of course, the media constraint of 'concision', a sixth barrier discussed by Chunn, disadvantages social critics because we cannot simply rely upon 'common sense' understandings of the world. We must instead provide evidence for our claims, which is precluded by the need for concision (Achbar 1994: 158, cited in Chunn 2007: 54). To interrogate whether men who are 'chronically abused by the women in their lives' (Urback 2014) are similarly situated to battered women, I would have had to unpack the statistics touted by men's rights groups that suggest equal levels of violence by women against men (Flood 2010: 341) and the claim that battered men do not report violence to police (Dragiewicz and DeKeseredy 2012). Because I was not given the time for such a lengthy answer and because I refused to give my precious minutes to 'battered men', my response – not my field of expertise – was 'concise' but uninformative.

Worse still, some journalists pandered to the lowest level of engagement. On Canada AM Beverly Thomson was frustrated by my insistence on responding to the uproar over Butler's lede sentence in legal rather than moral terms. She badgered me by asking me repeatedly if I was saying 'it was okay for women to kill sleeping batterers' (CTV 2013). 'Okay'? How to answer such a simplistic and baited question?

The dominant narratives that result from these constraints, ideologies and liberal tenets provide fertile ground for men's rights activists. The first narrative is that we live in a post-feminist world where women's equality has been achieved (Chunn 2007: 51), rendering battered women's advocacy unnecessary and feminist voices irrelevant. The second narrative follows, which is that feminists engage in reverse discrimination, both harming men and unfairly advantaging women (Chunn 2007: 52). Barbara Kay announced that I was making a bizarre plea for battered women to be above the law: 'that only these particular women should be allowed to kill with calculation aforethought and be exonerated anyway' (Kay 2013a). The third narrative emerges as critical columnists – usually women, who claim to be "dissident' feminists, former feminists, or anti-feminists' (Chunn 2007: 55) – 'dare' to be 'politically incorrect'. They question feminist 'orthodoxy' and repudiate battered women's claims to 'victimhood' by pronouncing that battered women are free to simply walk away from abusive male partners (Kay 2013b, 2013c).

### **The men's rights message: 19 blogs/petitions/videos ... and counting**

Unknown to me at the time I was responding to media, my book had become the rallying cry for an online campaign by A Voice for Men (AVFM), listed by the Southern Poverty Law Center (2012) among those 'men's rights' groups 'dedicated to savaging feminists', whose websites are 'thick with misogynistic attacks that can be astounding for the guttural hatred they express' (Southern Poverty Law Center 2012). This group, like many such groups studied by Michael Flood (2004), Robert Menzies (2007) and Pierette Bouchard and colleagues (2003), use the Internet to share their 'research' and strategies, raise money and galvanize followers, using a 'more unrestrained discourse of hate, often violent and unchecked, directed at women and feminists' (Bouchard, Boily and Proulx 2003: 3). These websites denounce 'feminist lies' about the prevalence of male violence against women and demean the 'wrong-headedly chivalrous values of battered men who suffer in silence' (Menzies 2007: 87). When they acknowledge men's violence, they blame it on the family law system or custodial mothers (Kay and Tolmie 1998: 57-58), and advocate for mediation, aimed at keeping 'the family' together (Flood 2010: 339).

The AVFM campaign included a petition to ban my book; blogs that attack the women whose trials I recount; creepy, pornographic, vaguely threatening *YouTube* videos about me and my

work, and the inclusion of my name and details on the Voice for Men's 'naming and shaming' list, 'register-her.com.' This list was set up by Paul Elam (the founder of AVFM) to target individual women and feminists and provide personal information about them, arguably inciting harassment (Goldwag 2012). This strategy of concerted attack upon individual feminists has its origins in the US, and has now been newly deployed by men's rights groups in Canada (Gotell and Dutton 2016).

The men's rights messages illuminated the media response to my book. Sarah Maddison argues that the 'discourses of men's rights are increasingly flowing into the social and symbolic worlds, and finding voice in the media and amongst social commentators as a part of the ongoing backlash against feminism' (Maddison 1999: 39). Although many of the ideas expressed by these men's rights groups have long been reflected in media reporting around battered women who kill, I was unaware of the uncanny alliance between even the more extremist versions and mainstream media. It is simply impossible to explain the persistent and in some cases insistent misrepresentation of my book by reference to journalistic commitment to 'balance' or to genuine inquiry. The sneering tone in which I was often addressed was unprofessional and disrespectful, but reminiscent of every AVFM posting about my work. Indeed, I discovered that the columnist for the *National Post* who had been the most unrestrained in her attack on me is a long-time admirer of AVFM, a self-described 'peer' who has 'shamelessly cannibalized [AVFM] for journalistic fodder' (Kay 2014).

Robert Menzies' study of the online world of men's rights activists characterizes its themes and purposes as:

A torrent of diatribes, invectives, atrocity tales, claims to entitlement, calls to arms, and prescriptions for change in the service of men, children, families, God, the past, the future, the nation, the planet, and all other things non-feminist. (Menzies 2007: 65)

Thus the AVFM blogs and videos name me (Behre 2015: 543), simultaneously aggrandizing and vilifying me. They describe me as 'Canada's most influential and respected feminist legal scholar', 'acclaimed professor of law', 'as mainstream and connected as it gets', 'educated, connected and sophisticated', 'prominent public intellectual' (Davison and Hembling 2014), with an 'impressive feminist biography' (Davison and Hembling 2013). They claim I am disingenuous in describing jury acquittals of battered women as social fact, because I 'had a lot to do with shaping the current law that resulted in those acquittals' (Davison and Hembling 2013). They go further: 'Sheehy is a veteran of twenty-five years of legal activism which has been spent changing laws in favour of her ideology. Professor Elizabeth Sheehy *is* the law' (Davison and Hembling 2014).

As Menzies (2007) shows, these groups assert that 'women's political and legal influence in contemporary society has surpassed that of men; that the modern state, along with its educational, judicial, medical, social welfare and other institutions discriminate actively against the male sex; that feminism comprises an ideological and material danger to the (North) American (and global) way of life' whereby 'feminazis' are 'engulfing the planet' (Menzies 2007: 70, 75). In the AVFM blogs I become a 'towering leviathan' (Menzies 2007: 75) who has 'succeeded in inscribing [my] gender-slanted beliefs and practices into the very foundation of state policy' (Menzies 2007: 77).

At the same time, AVFM activists attack my 'weasely nature' and denounce me as a 'serial killer' likened to Charles Manson (who also 'never held the knife') (Davison and Hembling 2013). I am a depraved, evil, violent and sociopathic 'murder-advocate' who lives in an 'asinine fantasy world' promoting 'blatant, malevolent and depraved corruption' (Hembling 2014a). In light of my demurral to CBC's questions about 'battered men', I am 'willfully [sic] obtuse', 'incompetent

in the field of [my] own expertise' or 'simply a fraud', with a 'malevolent intention' to pervert the law (Davison and Hembling 2014).

This double framing serves several purposes. First, if I am larger than life – powerful and accomplished – then I am a serious adversary and a definite threat. If I somehow represent the law and thus the state, then I am also a target for those who oppose government. Indeed, it is commonly accepted among men's rights groups that the state has been 'feminized', its institutions 'captured' by feminists (Maddison 1999: 43). AVFM reminds readers that I work in Canada, where we lack capital punishment, thus opening the door to 'murder-tourism' (Hembling 2014a). If I am hiding in academia, where I am recognized – even rewarded – for my work, then I am pulling the wool over the eyes of many under the guise of scholarship. After all, 'a social movement cannot afford to demonize a category of people highly prized in society' (Crowley 2009: 726) so professors like me must be constructed as fringe outliers. I deserve scorn and condemnation for my hateful ideas and my botched research. Together these frames generate anxiety and anger, a volatile mix of emotions that compromises independent thought and reason.

Second, these blogs use hyperbole and distortion to re-frame my research, a common tactic for men's rights activists (Girard 2009: 11). They claim that I encourage the murder of men by advocating for women's right to kill men without legal sanction, 'hoping to provide Canadian women with a legal how-to manual' (Davison and Hembling 2014a). A petition, targeting UBC Press and none other than Prime Minister Stephen Harper, is titled 'Protesting the spread of mortal violence by Professor Elizabeth Sheehy'; last I checked it had been signed by 92 people. My book, AVFM activists say, is about how women 'can use case law and performance art to legally execute men, and simultaneously save Canadian taxpayers the expense of a costly trial' (Davison and Hembling 2014a).

The AVFM blog claims that I suggest that women are safer to stay and kill rather than try to escape. My message, they say, is that women are pathetic and weak, unable to extricate themselves responsibly as adults from violent marriages by simply walking out the door, in spite of the abundant supports created for women (Hembling 2014a). They translate my point that not only women's but men's lives will be saved if we support women with safe exit, custody and financial support: 'fewer men would die if they just gave women the things they need'. In other words, they declare that I am threatening: 'Men, do what women want or we'll kill you'. One AVFM activist created a new noun for what he describes as 'women's right to kill': 'Sheehicide' (St Estephe 2014).

AVFM activists assert that 'men are roughly half the victims of reciprocal domestic violence and are MORE than half the victims of adult, non-reciprocal domestic violence' (Hembling 2014a), a reframing of male violence against women that has a long history in men's rights online activism. They suggest that I am engaging in sex discrimination – 'killing is only murder where the corpse has breasts and ovaries' – and that my focus on coercive control reflects an effort to criminalize more men.

Their rhetoric around my book also leaves out the context for both my recommendations and my public remarks. Hembling (2014a) points to 'hundreds of shelters, relief organizations, government and non-government agencies, specially trained police departments, gynocentric courts, and twenty-four hour support services'. These blogs and videos fail to mention that men's rights activists are dedicated to tearing down these very structures aimed at assisting women's escape. They simply do not discuss the cases of police neglect that resulted in women's loss of life, the abject brutality to which the women in my book were subjected or the fact that most of them were convicted and incarcerated.

Claims to 'truthiness' by men's rights voices, which 'people instinctually believe or wish to believe are true even if directly contradicted by empirical evidence' (Behre 2015: 570), are far easier to make than to challenge simply and cleanly. For example one blog asserts that in two interviews I said that a woman in Canada is killed by her male partner every 6 days, but in a third interview (CBC) I said one woman is killed every 4.8 days (Davison and Hembling 2014a). In fact, I told CBC that I was quoting Statistics Canada's specific data for 2011 – the most recent available at that time – as opposed to relying on the generalized average statistic that is widely quoted for Canada of one woman killed every 6 days.

Their use of gender neutrality and false parallels – 'For example, if a woman can use past abuse to reduce a murder charge then, if your son is bullied at school, he can legally bring his dad's glock to school the next day and gun down his bully' (Hembling 2014a) – distracted me initially from considering the critical race implications of their postings. I had not known that the vast majority of men's rights hawkers claim to be white, well-educated, middle-class men (Crowley 2009: 728; Behre 2015: 531). Several authors have argued that their anti-feminist rhetoric 'creates patterns of invisibility for white and upper-class perpetrators of violence against women' (Dragiewicz 2012: 57) and masks racist backlash against immigrant and African-American women (Coston and Kimmel 2013: 373, 379). The only woman in my book that AVFM has so far targeted is an Aboriginal woman (Donelda Kay) and the men's rights activists do not hesitate to draw upon racist epithets to make their case when referring to 'Husbandicide, the female killing of men, is really just the new black. By "black", of course, we mean n\*\*\*\*\*' (Davison and Hembling 2014a).

The men's rights blog's final tactic is the subtle invocation of sexual violence and physical threat against me and other women: 'we are coming for all of you' (Davison and Hembling 2014b). Consistent perhaps with their aspirations for more mainstream readership, most of the AVFM blogs and videos are not overtly violent (Behre 2015: 543). They are, however, rife with veiled threats and adolescent sexual posturings, using headlines such as 'Frying Elizabeth Sheehy's Battered Wives' and *YouTube* video titles 'Elizabeth Sheehy should fear the COCK Fairy'. Davison and Hembling appear to smirk as they repeat the words 'COCK' ('Community Organized Compassion and Kindness') and 'TWTAT' (another acronym for an organization) in their videos. They relish phallic imagery; their organization is 'an upright alternative to that dark and unappealing hole', which chooses to be 'virile' rather than 'limp or passive', and which will engage in a 'long hard thrusting of the intimate centre of feminist legal activism'. They euphemistically urge viewers to 'help me find a new career'. Images of women that accompany these various blogs are dripping in blood and several include a knife.

As such, the men's rights blogs reproduce the narratives of men who batter (Mullaney 2007: 233-235), minimizing men's violence and attributing blame or responsibility for it to women themselves (Dragiewicz 2012: 24). They warn that my book can be used to justify intimate femicide (Hembling 2013). One author muses:

What if our society has begun, under the smog of sex-selective feminist jurisprudence and justice to seek redress of grievance by avenues not within the law? If the law has ceased to provide reliable justice based on social caste, then eventually, groups held in contempt by law, treated as unworthy of protection from victimization will address grievances by other means. (Hembling, quoted in blogpost by Ann2011 2014)

## Conclusion

What mainstream media say about wife battering and husband killing plays a powerful role in shaping public discourse about the causes of and appropriate responses to these acts (Minaker and Snider 2006). This discourse in turn affects battered women's advocates' ability to engage

law reform and to secure from the state the resources needed to protect women's lives (Girard 2009). The media de-genders intimate partner violence by foregrounding violent women and claiming social tolerance for women's but not men's violence. By simultaneously gendering blame – assigning responsibility to women for their own victimization and condemning battered women's advocates for 'male bashing' – the media 'diverts attention away from men's responsibility and the cultural and structural factors that oppress women and foster violence' (Berns 2001: 277). Feminists must challenge such public discourses and defend those battered women who are abandoned by the state to live half-lives of dread and fear.

The messages conveyed by mainstream media and men's rights activists are similar, even though the latter are expressed in more extreme and violent terms. First, my alleged claim that battered women are 'morally justified' in killing their abusers, even when they are asleep, is not far from claiming that I am encouraging women to kill rather than escape their abusers. This preoccupation diverted attention away from men's violence to instead focus on the rare cases where women kill outside of a physical confrontation. Second, both sources assumed equivalence between women's and men's violence and demanded that I explain whether my work has application for 'battered men'. This framing casts my work as 'male bashing' or at least deliberate indifference to an alleged widespread and serious social problem of husband battering. Third, both sources elided the social, economic and political structures that make women's safe exit from violent men precarious, implicating women as responsible for the dilemmas that lead to homicide and obscuring any state responsibility to aid women's escape. Thus when I inserted the context of women's endangerment – that a Canadian woman is killed by her current or ex-partner every 6 days – I was cut off by the Canada AM host's dismissive retort – 'we know that' – who then repeated her demand that I explain whether it is 'OK' for women to kill sleeping batterers.

What can be learned from my experience? Although unpleasant, I would urge feminists preparing for media work on male violence against women to read not only the work of feminist media scholars but also the online diatribes of men's rights activists. We must be forewarned of the common attacks on battered women and their advocates so as to be able to anticipate media questions and the potential distortion of our research and analysis. The opportunity to develop pithy answers to the questions that align with 'common sense' liberal notions of equality is invaluable. This preparation must include the development of key messages that can be simply and memorably conveyed, and used to re-focus the interview.

We also need to deconstruct the claims of men's rights activists and exploit the inherent contradictions in their rhetoric and strategy (Menzies 2007: 89). For example, I pointed out in many interviews not only the rarity of husband-killing compared to intimate femicide, but also that the best way to save more men's lives is to invest in the safety and support provided by women's shelters: husband-killing declines dramatically when women have safe exit for themselves and their children. Other contradictions to confront and expose in media include men's rights activists' insistence that battered women should just be adults and leave to escape the violence, even while advocating that women must remain enmeshed in shared custody arrangements and challenging women's entitlement to spousal and child support. It might also be worthwhile to respond to mainstream media questions by explicitly linking them to men's rights' and batterers' rhetoric in order to alert media consumers to the political content of what might otherwise seem to be a neutral question.

Finally, battered women's advocates must seek out feminist journalists and columnists who will ask the right questions, fairly examine the issues and represent feminist research and analysis. In my case, it took Janice Kennedy some time to write about my book – because she actually read it – so her column came some weeks after the attacks. It was worth the wait for an informed comment that had the last word: '[T]he recent negative sputtering about Sheehy is little more than knee-jerk reaction to superficial and sensational summations. She does not, in

fact, advocate the murder of men, though she does offer insights into the morality involved in traumatic responses, including self-defence. The license to kill ascribed to her by her fiercest critics may actually reflect their not having read the book' (Kennedy 2013). We need to support feminist journalists, demand that our media sources employ them and join those organizations like Informed Opinions ([www.informedopinions.org](http://www.informedopinions.org)) that are committed to ensuring that women's expertise and interests contribute to public debate and policy development in Canadian media.

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<sup>1</sup> These interviews include *The Current* (19 December 2013); *CTV Canada AM* (17 December 2013); *The Motts Toronto* (16 December 2013); *CJAD Radio Montreal* (13 December 2013); *News Talk 770 Calgary* (12 December 2013); *CFRA Ottawa News Talk 580* (12 December 2013); *AM 980 London* (12 December 2013); *Bill Carroll Los Angeles* (12 December 2013); *Arlene Bynon Show Toronto* (12 December 2013); *CFRB Toronto News Talk 1010* (12 December 2013); *Radio Canada Rene Hardy (Ottawa/Gatineau)* (11 December 13 2013); *1310 News Ottawa* (11 December 2013); *610 CKTB St. Catharines* (11 December 2013); *Bill Carroll Show Toronto AM 640* (11 December 2013).

<sup>2</sup> My book also received the David Walter Mundell Medal for 2014, awarded by the Attorney General for Ontario.

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#### **Case Law**

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