



Naming Domestic Violence:

A Review of Terminology, Definitions and
Conceptual Frameworks

Executive Summary

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Purpose

Terminology used to describe domestic and interpersonal violence is varied, overlapping, and not always consistently applied. Terms such as *domestic violence (DV)*, *domestic abuse*, *intimate partner violence (IPV)*, *family violence (FV)*, *gender-based violence (GBV)*, *sexual violence*, *coercive control*, and *technology-facilitated violence* can describe related experiences while emphasizing different relationships, behaviours, forms of harm, contexts, or mechanisms.

This review examines how these terms are defined and used across the literature, how their conceptual boundaries differ, and what those differences may mean for recognition, service access, research, policy, and organizational communication. For the Brenda Strafford Foundation (BSF), the purpose is to support a more deliberate and consistent approach to terminology across research, communications, programs, policy, and external engagement.

Key Message

No single term adequately captures every dimension of domestic and interpersonal violence. A shared organizational language should therefore focus on principles for selecting terminology rather than requiring one universal term.

Different terms place different aspects of an experience at the centre:

- **DV** may emphasize the domestic setting.
- **IPV** emphasizes violence or harm within an intimate partner relationship.
- **FV** encompasses a broader range of family relationships.
- **GBV** emphasizes gender and power.
- **Sexual violence** emphasizes the sexual nature and lack of consent.
- **Coercive control** emphasizes patterns of behaviour used to establish or maintain power and control.
- **Technology-facilitated violence** emphasizes the role of technology in enabling or amplifying harm.

- **Victim** and **survivor** foreground different aspects of a person's experience, while person-centred language creates space for self-description and identity.

These terms may overlap, but they are not necessarily interchangeable. Terminology should therefore be selected according to what is being described, whose experience is being represented, the purpose and audience of the communication, and which dimensions of violence need to remain visible.

What the Literature Shows

Terminology Establishes Different Boundaries

The literature demonstrates that terms used to describe violence can be organized around different dimensions. For example, the literature distinguishes between place, relationship, and behaviour: DV emphasizes place, FV emphasizes the relationship between the person experiencing violence and the person using violence, and IPV emphasizes behaviour within an intimate relationship.

This distinction helps explain why related terms can describe overlapping experiences without being equivalent. IPV is defined around an intimate partner relationship and can include physical, sexual, psychological, emotional, financial, stalking, reproductive, and controlling behaviours. FV extends the relational scope to include relationships such as parent-child, sibling, and extended family relationships.

Other terms shift the focus from relationship to the nature or mechanism of harm. Sexual violence identifies non-consensual sexual behaviour regardless of relationship, while coercive control emphasizes a pattern of behaviours used to gain or maintain power and control. Technology-facilitated violence identifies the role of digital technology in facilitating, intensifying, or amplifying harm.

The result is not a hierarchy of terms, but a set of overlapping lenses that make different aspects of an experience visible.

Terminology Can Affect Recognition and Response

Terminology can influence whether experiences are recognized as violence or abuse, whether services are perceived as relevant, how bystanders interpret events, and how systems respond.

Terminology can also affect bystander interpretation and associations between terminology, comfort with terminology, help-seeking, and service access. Different IPV-related terms carry different meanings, while characteristics such as marital status, gender, and perceptions of whether violence was provoked can influence how an event is understood.

These findings suggest that terminology operates alongside existing assumptions about violence. Terms can influence expectations about who is harmed, who is responsible, what constitutes violence, and what response is appropriate.

Terminological Variation Matters for Research

Variation in terminology and definitions also creates challenges for research and measurement. Different terms establish different boundaries around what is included, affecting which experiences are captured and how findings can be interpreted or compared.

This is particularly evident in areas such as intimate partner sexual violence, where terminology varies across researchers, advocates, practitioners, and survivors. Greater consistency can support clearer measurement and communication, but standardization that removes meaningful distinctions may also obscure important differences between experiences.

Language Should Account for People and Their Experiences

The literature also considers how people involved in violence are described. Victim is associated with weakness, powerlessness, vulnerability, innocence, and ongoing effects of victimization, while survivor is associated with strength, recovery, and having moved forward. People may identify with either, both, or neither.

Person-centred and strengths-based approaches provide alternatives that avoid defining people primarily through their experiences of violence. Language such as person who experienced IPV, survivor, and thriver, while similar principles can be applied to people who use violence through terms such as person using violence or person who caused harm.

This approach does not require less precise language about violence. Rather, it allows terminology to describe harm while recognizing identity, agency, and self-description.

Gender, Intersectionality, and Context Matter

Relationship-based terminology does not capture every dimension of violence. GBV, for example, foregrounds gender and power rather than primarily defining violence through the relationship between the people involved.

An intersectional perspective further recognizes that experiences of violence can be shaped by overlapping dimensions including gender, age, disability, race, ethnicity, social class, and sexual orientation. Terminology that assumes heterosexuality, marriage, cohabitation, or family structures can therefore narrow the experiences it recognizes.

Inclusivity does not mean removing conceptual boundaries. Rather, it requires attention to who a term includes or excludes and which assumptions are embedded in its use.

Principles for a Shared Language

The literature supports five principles for selecting terminology.

Precision

Terminology should accurately reflect the experience, relationship, behaviour, or context being described. The most appropriate term is not necessarily the most technical one, but it should communicate accurately without implying boundaries that do not apply.

Inclusivity

Terminology should account for diverse relationships, identities, and experiences without unnecessary assumptions about gender, sexuality, age, disability, living arrangements, or family structure.

Recognition of Power and Context

Where relevant, terminology should make visible the relationships, patterns, circumstances, and power dynamics surrounding violence rather than reducing it to an isolated act.

Person-Centred Language

Language should avoid unnecessarily defining people by their experiences of violence. Where appropriate, terminology should allow for self-description, identity, and agency while maintaining clarity about harm and responsibility.

Consistency Without Oversimplification

A shared language requires consistency in how terminology is selected and applied, not uniformity in the terms themselves. Related terms should not be treated as interchangeable simply because they overlap.

Considerations for The Brenda Stafford Foundation

For BSF, these findings provide a basis for developing a shared organizational approach to terminology across research and evaluation, communications, programs, policy, education, partnerships, and knowledge mobilization.

Establish a Core Organizational Approach

BSF could identify preferred terminology for common contexts while recognizing that no single term will be appropriate in every circumstance. The approach could distinguish between broad organizational language and terms used when greater specificity is required.

Match Terminology to Purpose and Audience

Terminology should reflect the purpose and audience of each communication. Research may require greater conceptual precision, while public-facing materials may require more familiar language. Technical terms can be used where appropriate but may require explanation for broader audiences.

Use Person-Centred and Inclusive Language

BSF should avoid unnecessarily defining people by their experiences of violence and, where appropriate, use person-centred language such as *person who experienced violence*, *survivor*, or *person using violence*. Organizational language should also avoid assumptions about relationships, living arrangements, gender, or identity.

Where individuals or communities have identified the language they use to describe their experiences, that language should be respected where possible.

Apply the Approach Across Organizational Outputs

A shared terminology approach could be supported through a practical organizational resource containing:

- preferred terminology and definitions;
- distinctions between related terms;
- terms that may be used interchangeably in specific contexts;
- terminology to use when greater specificity is required;
- considerations for inclusive and person-centred language; and
- examples for research, public-facing, and internal communications.

The goal would be consistency in terminology decisions while preserving the flexibility needed to accurately describe different experiences and contexts.

Conclusion

The literature demonstrates that terminology used to describe domestic and interpersonal violence is neither uniform nor interchangeable. Different terms foreground different dimensions of violence, including relationship, setting, behaviour, form of harm, pattern, gender, power, technology, and personal experience.

For BSF, the opportunity is therefore not to identify one universal term, but to establish a clear and consistent approach to choosing terminology. A shared language can support precision, inclusivity, person-centred practice, recognition of power and context, and organizational consistency.

The objective is consistency without oversimplification: language that is clear and intentional while remaining capable of representing the complexity and diversity of experiences of domestic and interpersonal violence.