



Naming Domestic Violence:

A Review of Terminology, Definitions and Conceptual Frameworks

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Introduction

Terminology is not a neutral feature of discourse on domestic violence (DV). Rather, the language used to describe violence, those who experience it, and those who perpetrate it can shape how violence is understood, recognized, researched, and addressed. Inconsistent terminology within the DV field creates challenges for communication among researchers, practitioners, advocates, and other stakeholders, suggesting a need for greater conceptual clarity [1]. The literature similarly demonstrates that language can influence understandings of intimate partner violence (IPV) and responses to it, including how violent behaviour is interpreted, responsibility is assigned, and decisions are made about intervention or help-seeking [2, 3]. Furthermore, language can function as a mechanism through which social understandings, cognitive boundaries, and perceptions of DV are constructed, highlighting how violence, harm, responsibility, and affected individuals are conceptualized [4]. Consequently, the terms used to describe DV are not merely interchangeable descriptors; they foreground specific dimensions of violence while potentially obscuring others.

The challenge is compounded by the absence of universally consistent terminology across research, policy, service provision, and public discourse. Terms including *DV*, *IPV*, *family violence (FV)*, *gender-based violence (GBV)*, *sexual violence*, *psychological abuse*, *emotional abuse*, and *coercive control* may overlap in meaning while also emphasizing different relationships, behaviours, contacts, or mechanisms of harm. As of 2025, the Government of Canada distinguishes these concepts according to the relationship between the individuals involved, the context in which violence occurs, and the forms of behaviour involved, while researchers in the sector similarly demonstrate that distinctions between FV, DV, and IPV can be understood according to whether terminology emphasizes relationships, setting, or behaviour [5, 6]. Other work has examined differences in terminology according to the forms and patterns of harm being described, as well as the identities and experiences of those affected. Considerable variation in terminology used to describe intimate partner sexual violence (IPSV), despite labels used to describe people who

have experienced sexual violence carrying different associations with vulnerability, agency, and recovery [7, 8].

These distinctions also raise questions about whose experiences are represented within conceptualizations of DV. Person-centred and strengths-based approaches emphasize language that recognizes individuals beyond their experiences of violence and respects how they describe those experiences [2]. Furthermore, intersectional approaches recognize that experiences of violence are shaped by overlapping dimensions of identity and structural inequality. Inclusive terminology is particularly relevant when describing IPV across diverse sexual orientations and gender identities, where assumptions about relationships or identities may affect whether experiences are recognized within existing terminology [9]. Terminological choices must therefore balance conceptual clarity, inclusivity, recognition of diverse experiences, and sensitivity to the ways language may influence agency and responsibility.

This review examines the terminology used to describe DV and related forms of interpersonal violence, with particular attention to the distinctions, overlaps, and implications associated with commonly used terms. Rather than assuming a single term can adequately capture all experiences of domestic and interpersonal violence, the review considers how terminology centres particular relationships, behaviours, contexts, forms of harm, or experiences, and what may consequently be emphasized or overlooked. The review seeks to support a more consistent and intentional approach to terminology across research, practice, policy, advocacy, and organizational communication while recognizing that terminology must remain responsive to context and the experiences of people affected by violence.

Evolution of Domestic Violence Terminology

The terminology used to describe DV has evolved alongside changing understandings of the nature, context, and consequences of violence within intimate and familial relationships. Earlier conceptualizations

frequently centred on identifiable acts of physical violence, while subsequent scholarship has increasingly recognized that harm may occur through psychological, emotional, sexual, economic, and controlling behaviours, including patterns that may not involve physical violence. This evolution has contributed to the use of overlapping terms, including *DV*, *domestic abuse*, *partner aggression*, *IPV*, and *coercive control*. Terminology remains an area of debate within the field, with different terms reflecting different conceptualizations of aggression, violence, and abuse [1]. Similarly, language used to describe IPV shapes how the phenomenon is understood and responded to [2]. Rather than representing a straightforward progression toward a single preferred terminology, the evolution of DV language reflects ongoing efforts to capture the complexity of violence while maintaining conceptual clarity across research, practice, policy, and advocacy.

Domestic Violence vs. Domestic Abuse

The terms *DV* and *domestic abuse* are often used interchangeably, but their use can reflect different emphasis in how harm is conceptualized. *Violence* is commonly associated with physical and/or sexual aggression, whereas *abuse* may encompass multiple forms of aggression and harm [1, 9, 10]. Additionally, abuse can be distinguished from narrower conceptualizations of aggression by noting that abuse may encompass several relational dimensions, including context, motivation, and consequences associated with harmful behaviour [1]. Abuse may also encompass the broader experiences and impacts of victimization, including trauma, sociocultural factors, gender-related experiences, and emotional responses such as fear, anxiety, and helplessness [1].

The broader use of *domestic abuse* has been associated with recognition that harm within domestic relationships may extend beyond physical acts. Women's Aid North East Lincolnshire in the United Kingdom characterizes *domestic abuse* as encompassing emotional, psychological, and financial abuse, as well as coercive and controlling behaviour, illustrating how the term can be used to capture a wider range of experiences than physical violence alone [10]. Still, this does not mean that *domestic abuse* has a universally agreed-upon or consistently broad definition. *Violence* and *abuse* are sometimes used interchangeably, while also being applied differently across contexts. Consequently,

the distinction between DV and domestic abuse is best understood as contested and context-dependent rather than as a fixed definitional boundary.

The distinction is further complicated by the relationship between acts of violence and broader experiences of abuse. It is essential to emphasize that physical violence may occur without constituting abuse, while abuse may occur without physical violence [1, 9]. This distinction complicates the assumption that the terms are simply interchangeable and instead suggests that their use can influence which dimensions of harm are highlighted. The choice between *DV* and *domestic abuse* should therefore be considered in relation to the purpose, context, population, and forms of harm being described, rather than assuming that one term is inherently more accurate in all circumstances.

Partner Aggression

The terminology of *partner aggression* provides another example of how language can reflect different conceptual boundaries within research on violence between intimate partners. Partner aggression is described as encompassing physical and/or sexual aggression, as well as psychological forms of aggression, while distinguishing this from *partner abuse* [1].

This distinction is important because aggression can be used to describe behaviours or acts without necessarily implying the broader relational characteristics associated with abuse. Terminology focused on aggression may therefore places greater emphasis on the behaviour itself and may be particularly relevant when researching the occurrence, frequency, or characteristics of aggressive behaviours between partners without making assumptions about the wider relationship or experience. As such, terminology focused on aggression may not necessarily communicate the broader meaning that is attached to the concept of abuse and instead may communicate a wider relational and contextual understanding. The distinction illustrates how terminology can establish different conceptual boundaries even when terms describe overlapping behaviours.

Domestic Violence, Intimate Partner Violence, and Family Violence

As terminology within the field has developed, increasing attention has been given to the relationship and context in which violence occurs. *DV*, *IPV*, and *FV* are frequently used to describe overlapping experiences, but they are not necessarily synonymous. Differences among these terms can relate to the setting in which violence occurs, the relationship between the individuals involved, and the boundaries of the violence being described [6]. These distinctions are identified by describing domestic terminology as emphasizing the domestic setting, family terminology as emphasizing the relationship between individuals, and intimate partner terminology as emphasizing behaviour occurring within an intimate relationship [6]. As of 2025, the Government of Canada distinguishes DV, IPV, and FV according to differences in context and relationship, while recognizing that these forms of violence can overlap [5]. Understanding these distinctions is important because the terminology selected can influence which experiences are included within the conceptual boundaries of DV and which may remain outside them.

Domestic Violence

The meaning of DV varies considerably across sources. Some definitions emphasize the domestic or private setting in which violence occurs, while others use the term more specifically to describe violence between intimate partners. Others conceptualize DV in terms of patterns of abusive behaviour and the exercise of power within families or intimate relationships.

Table 1. Definitions of Domestic Violence

Source	Definition or Conceptualization	Primary Emphasis	Scope/Boundary
Yuvayapan [4]	Gendered patterns of abusive behaviour, including physical, sexual, emotional, economic, and psychological actions used to gain power over intimate people in families or relationships.	Patterns of abuse, power, and relationships.	Broader than physical violence.
Government of Canada [5]	Considered under definition of IPV	-	-
Women's Aid North East Lincolnshire [10]	An encompassing term that recognizes a range of abusive behaviours beyond physical violence. Refers to harm as domestic abuse.	Range of abusive behaviours.	Extends beyond physical violence.
UN Women [11]	Violence that occurs within the private, domestic sphere, generally between individuals who are related through blood or intimacy.	Location/context and relational connection.	Domestic/private sphere and relationships situated within it.

Women's Shelters Canada [12]	Violence between parents and children, roommates, and others who share a home.	Shared household/domestic setting.	Includes relationships that are not intimate partnerships.
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Collectively, these definitions demonstrate that DV does not have one consistently applied boundary. The term therefore operates across several overlapping dimensions. At its narrowest, DV may be primarily associated with violence between intimate partners within a shared household. At its broader boundary, it may encompass violence between family members or other people connected through a domestic environment. This variation is important because the term can signal different populations and experiences depending on the context in which it is used.

Terminological boundaries may also impact whether individuals recognize their experiences within the category. For example, a study found that college students may not identify their experiences as DV when they do not live with their intimate partner, illustrating how associated between DV and shared residence can create a narrower perceived boundary than some formal definitions intend [3]. The terminology used can consequently influence how people understand their experiences and whether they recognize them as relevant to DV services or interventions.

Overall, DV is best understood as a variably bounded term centred on violence occurring within a domestic, household, familial, or intimate context. Its boundaries may be defined by place, relationship, or both, and conceptualizations differ in the extent to which they emphasize specific forms of violence, patterns of behaviour, or power and harm. These variations help explain why DV overlaps with, but is not interchangeable with, the more specifically relationship-based term IPV and the broader relational category of FV.

Intimate Partner Violence

IPV provides a more explicitly relationship-based term. Across the literature, IPV generally refers to violence, abuse, or other harmful behaviours perpetrated by a current or former intimate partner. Yet, sources vary in the behaviours included and in whether IPV is conceptualized primarily through violence, abuse, power and control, or resulting harm.

Table 2. Definitions of Intimate Partner Violence

Source	Definition or Conceptualization	Primary Emphasis	Scope/Boundary
Nordin [3]	Encompasses physical and sexual violence, stalking, psychological aggression, and reproductive or sexual health control by a current or former intimate partner.	Forms of violence and controlling behaviours within an intimate relationship.	Current or former intimate partners.
Government of Canada [5]	Encompasses physical, sexual, emotional (psychological), or financial harm by a current or former intimate partner or spouse. Also referred to as domestic or spousal violence	Forms of harm and violence within an intimate partner relationship.	Includes marriage, common-law, and dating relationships; heterosexual and LGBTQ2 relationships; can occur during or after the relationship; does not require

			cohabitation or sexual intimacy.
Holt & Ahuja [9]	Occurs when a current or former intimate partner uses or threatens abusive, coercive, violent, oppressive, intimidating, or dominating behaviours to gain or maintain power and control over the other partner. Also used interchangeably with DV.	Power and control within a current or former intimate relationship, including abusive, coercive, threatening, and violent behaviours.	Current or former intimate partners; encompasses both actual and threatened behaviours.
UN Women [11]	Violence that occurs within the private, domestic sphere, generally between individuals who are related through blood or intimacy.	Location/context and relational connection.	Domestic/private sphere and relationships situated within it.
Women's Shelters Canada [12]	A form of GBV involving violence and abuse between current or former intimate partners. It is also	Violence and abuse within an intimate partner relationship.	Current or former intimate partners, including those who are dating, married, in common-law

	described as a form of DV.		partnerships, or separated.
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IPV is generally distinguished by the relationship between the individuals involved but vary in how the violence itself is characterized. Across the sources, IPV encompasses multiple forms of harm, including physical, sexual, psychological or emotional, financial, and controlling behaviours. While some conceptualizations focus on violence or harm perpetrated by a current or former intimate partner, others emphasize behaviours used to gain or maintain power and control. The sources also demonstrate substantial overlap between IPV and other terminology, with some sources referring to IPV as domestic or spousal violence, and others describing IPV as a form of GBV and DV [5, 12].

The boundaries of who is considered an intimate partner also vary in how explicitly they are described. For example, the Government of Canada includes dating, common-law, and marital relationships and specifies that IPV can occur during or after a relationship, regardless of whether partners live together or are sexually intimate [5]. The findings also demonstrate how terminology can influence the interpretation of violence. Specifically, different IPV-related terms can carry different meanings for bystanders, while factors such as marital status, gender of the person using violence, and whether violence is perceived as provoked can affect how an event is understood [3].

Family Violence

FV is generally organized around the relationship between the person experiencing violence and the person using violence, rather than a particular setting or a single type of behaviour. The term can encompass violence and abuse across a broad range of family and intimate relationships, including relationships between partners, parents and children, siblings, and extended family members. Yet, the boundaries of FV vary across sources, particularly in how intimate partner relationships and forms of violence are incorporated.

Table 3. Definitions of Family Violence

Source	Definition or Conceptualization	Primary Emphasis	Scope/Boundary
Government of Canada [5]	Involves abuse or neglect by a family member or an intimate person, current or former.	Abuse and neglect within family and intimate relationships.	Includes intimate partners as well as parent-child, sibling, and extended family relationships. Encompasses DV, IPV, and sibling violence.
Long et al. [6]	Any violence or abuse within family including violence involving partners, parents, children, siblings, uncles/aunts, cousins, grandparents, and in-laws.	Relationship between the person experiencing violence and the person using violence.	Broad family relationships, including intimate partners and extended family. Encompasses DV, IPV, and sibling violence.
Holt & Ahuja [9]	Occurs within family groupings and can include abuse between parents and children, siblings, and extended family members, in addition to abuse	Relationship between people within a family grouping.	Includes intimate partners as well as parent-child, sibling, and extended family relationships.

	between intimate partners.		
	DV also used when referring to FV.		
Lansdell et al. [13]	Violence between family members as well as between current and former intimate partners. It may include physical, sexual, emotional and psychological abuse and controlling or threatening behaviour. Forms can include physical, emotional, sexual, social, psychological, verbal, and spiritual violence.	Forms of violence, abuse, and controlling behaviour across family and intimate relationships.	Includes family members and current or former intimate partners.

Across the literature, FV is characterized by a broad relational scope. The term can encompass violence between intimate partners as well as violence between parents and children, siblings, and members of the extended family. This makes FV a wider relational category than terminology that is limited to intimate partner relationships.

The definitions also demonstrate that family violence is not restricted to a particular form of harm. Physical, sexual, emotional, psychological,

economic, social, verbal, and spiritual forms of violence or abuse may be included, alongside controlling or threatening behaviour and, in some definitions, neglect. The term therefore captures a range of behaviours and experiences that can occur across family relationships.

At the same time, the boundaries of FV are not entirely consistent across sources. Definitions differ in how they characterize the relationship between FV, IPV, and DV. Some explicitly position IPV within FV, while others use overlapping terminology. This variation reinforces that the meaning and scope of FV depend in part on how family relationships are defined and which forms of violence are included.

Terminology for Specific Forms of Violence

While DV, IPV, and FV describe violence according to the relationships or contexts in which it occurs, terminology can also focus on the specific forms, behaviours, or mechanisms through which harm occurs. These terms can identify forms of violence that may be overlooked when violence is understood primarily through physical acts. The following subsections examine terminology used to describe psychological and emotional abuse, sexual and IPSV, coercive control, and technology-facilitated violence.

Psychological and Emotional Abuse

Psychological and emotional abuse are terms used to describe forms of harm that may not involve physical violence but can have significant effects on a person's emotional well-being, thoughts, perceptions, and sense of self. The terms are often used interchangeably, although some conceptualizations distinguish them according to the aspect of a person's experience being targeted.

Table 4. Differentiating Psychological and Emotional Abuse

Term	Definition or Conceptualization	Primary Emphasis	Scope/Boundary
Psychological Abuse [14]	Targets cognitive processes, including attempts to manipulate a person's thoughts, perceptions, and understanding of reality. Examples include gaslighting, mind games, creating confusion, manipulation, triangulation, projection, forced dependency, threats, excessive monitoring, sabotaging success, hypercriticism, exploitation of insecurities, chronic lying, conditioning through rewards and punishments, and smearing reputation.	Thoughts, perceptions, cognitions, and understanding of reality.	Includes behaviours that manipulate or undermine cognitive processes.

Emotional Abuse [14]	Aimed at a person's feelings and emotional well-being, causing emotional pain, distress, or harm through manipulation of emotions to exert control. Examples include guilt-tripping, playing the victim, withholding affection, and behaviours that leave an individual feeling unworthy, unloved, or deeply hurt.	Feelings, emotions, and emotional well-being.	Includes behaviours that manipulate or harm a person's emotional experience.
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The terminology distinguishes psychological and emotional abuse primarily according to what aspect of a person's experience is being targeted. Emotional abuse centres on feelings and emotional well-being, whereas psychological abuse centres on cognitive processes, including thoughts, perceptions, and understandings of reality. At the same time, the examples associated with each term demonstrate substantial overlap, and the terms are often used interchangeably or may occur together. For example, behaviours such as gaslighting and guilt-tripping can affect both emotional well-being and cognitive functioning, contributing to experiences of emotional distress, confusion, and disorientation [14]. This overlap highlights the difficulty of distinguishing between forms of abuse based solely on their psychological or cognitive effects [14].

This overlap means that the terms do not necessarily establish two discrete categories of abuse. Rather, they illustrate how terminology can draw attention to different dimensions of the same experience. The distinction is therefore less about identifying separate behaviours and more about which aspect of harm or experience the terminology foregrounds.

Sexual Violence and Intimate Partner Sexual Violence

Sexual violence is a broad term that encompasses unwanted or harmful sexual behaviours regardless of the relationship between the people involved. When these behaviours occur within an intimate relationship, the terminology of IPSV is used to identify the relational context. The literature also demonstrates variation in the terms used to describe specific experiences, including rape, forced sex, and sexual coercion.

Table 5. Differentiating Sexual Violence and Intimate Partner Sexual Violence

Term	Definition or Conceptualization	Primary Emphasis	Scope/Boundary
Sexual Violence [5, 11]	A sexual act without consent, an attempt or threat to obtain a sexual act, or unwanted sexual comments or advances, including other non-consensual behaviours of a sexual nature regardless of	Non-consensual sexual acts and behaviours.	Can be perpetrated by a person, regardless of their relationship to the person experiencing violence or the setting in which it occurs.

	relationship, including but not limited to home and work.		
Intimate Partner Sexual Violence [7]	Definitions of IPSV are inconsistent and may describe co-occurring physical and sexual violence within an intimate relationship. Terms used include rape, forced sex, and sexual coercion.	Sexual violence within an intimate relationship.	Intimate partner context; terminology varies across researchers, advocates, practitioners, and survivors.

Sexual violence is primarily distinguished by the sexual nature of the behaviour and the absence of consent, rather than by the relationship between the people involved [5, 11]. This gives the term a broad scope across relationships and settings. The addition of *intimate partner* shifts the emphasis toward the relational context in which the sexual violence occurs.

The terminology used for sexual violence within intimate relationships is less consistent. Terms such as *rape*, *forced sex*, and *sexual coercion* may be used to describe overlapping experiences. The terminology used to identify the relationship can also affect the scope of what is being described. For example, *marital rape* and *spousal rape* explicitly identify an intimate relationship but narrowly define that relationship as marital. The term *intimate partner rape* may address this limitation by encompassing a broader range of intimate relationships. Still, survivors may have difficulty referring to sexual assault by an intimate partner as rape, demonstrating that terminology is shaped not only by how researchers and

practitioners categorize violence, but also by how people understand and describe their own experiences.

These distinctions highlight the importance of considering both the nature of the harm and the relationship in which it occurs. Describing an experience as IPV identifies the intimate partner context, while identifying specifically as sexual violence or IPSV foregrounds the sexual nature of the harm. The literature's attention to inconsistent terminology and survivors' own use of language demonstrates that terminology is not simply a technical classification; it can influence whether and how experiences are recognized as violence.

Coercive Control

Coercive control shifts attention from individual acts of violence towards patterns of behaviour used to intimidate, isolate, degrade, and control another person. The terminology captures combinations of behaviours that may operate together to establish or maintain power within a relationship.

Table 6. Defining Coercive Control

Term	Definition or Conceptualization	Primary Emphasis	Scope/Boundary
Coercive control [3, 15]	A strategic pattern or course of coercive, oppressive, intimidating, threatening, or dominating behaviours used to gain or maintain power and control over an intimate partner.	Patterned behaviour, power and control, intimidation, isolation, and domination.	Primarily described within intimate partner relationships; encompasses multiple behaviours that may occur together or over time.

	These behaviours may include isolation, degradation, intimidation, threats, coercive tactics, and control over reproductive or sexual health, and may occur alongside physical or sexual violence.		
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Coercive control places pattern, power, and control at the centre of how violence is understood. The concept draws attention to combinations of behaviours that may appear individually minor or non-violent but can form part of a broader pattern of intimidation, degradation, isolation, or domination [15].

Different behaviours can therefore operate together rather than being understood as isolated events. Physical abuse, sexual coercion, threats, psychological aggression, and controlling behaviours can form a broader course of conduct [15]. Coercive control provides terminology for describing the relationship between behaviours and the pattern they create, rather than focusing solely on individual incidents.

Technology-Facilitated Violence

Technology-facilitated violence describes harmful behaviours that are committed, assisted, amplified, or enabled through digital technologies and information and communication technologies. The terminology recognizes that technology can facilitate harm occurring both online and in person.

Table 7. Defining Technology-Facilitated Violence

Term	Definition or Conceptualization	Primary Emphasis	Scope/Boundary
Technology-Facilitated Violence [5, 11]	Any harmful act or range of behaviours that are committed, assisted, aggravated, or amplified through digital tools or information and communication technologies to facilitate virtual and/or in-person harm. Includes behaviours intended to threaten, harass, bully, embarrass, assault, extort, coerce, torment, or socially exclude another person. Also known as cyberviolence.	Technology as a means of facilitating, intensifying, or amplifying harm.	Includes both virtual and in-person harm and a range of behaviours and forms of harm.

Technology-facilitated violence is distinguished primarily by the role technology plays in enabling, facilitating, intensifying, or amplifying harm. Unlike terminology that categorizes violence according to the relationship between people or the type of harm involved, this terminology identifies the mechanism through which harm is carried out.

The definitions also demonstrate that technology-facilitated violence is not a single form of abuse. Digital technologies can facilitate physical, sexual, psychological, social, political, and economic harms, as well as behaviours such as harassment, threats, coercion, stalking, and image-based abuse [11]. Technology therefore cuts across existing categories of violence rather than creating a wholly separate type of harm.

This creates an important point of overlap with the other terminology examined in this review. Technology can facilitate or intensify IPV and enable behaviours such as online stalking and image-based abuse, including through deepfakes. Technology-facilitated violence can therefore identify how harm is facilitated, while other terms identify the relationship, type of harm, or pattern of behaviour involved.

Who and What Is Being Described?

Terminology in domestic and interpersonal violence research does more than classify forms of violence or identify the relationships in which harm occurs. It also shapes how people experiencing violence, people who use violence, and their experiences are described. Terms such as *victim* and *survivor* carry different assumptions about vulnerability, agency, and recovery, while person-centred approaches emphasize the importance of using language that reflects how people understand and describe their own experiences. Examining these choices is therefore important to understanding how terminology can influence identity, recognition, and responses to violence.

Victim versus Survivor

The terms *victim* and *survivor* are both used to describe people who have experienced DV or IPV, but they convey different understandings of the person and their experience. *Victim* is associated with weakness, powerlessness, vulnerability, innocence, and the ongoing effects of victimization, whereas *survivor* is associated with strength, recovery, and having moved forward from

the experience [8]. Furthermore, blame can be associated with the victim label and can influence perceptions of support, demonstrating that terminology can carry consequences beyond description [8]. Additionally, people may also identify as both, either, or neither, indicating that the terms do not necessarily capture a single or universal experience.

The distinction is important because the language used to describe a person can influence how their experience is interpreted. A flexible approach therefore recognizes that terminology should not be treated as universally applicable or interchangeable. Where possible, language should accommodate individual preferences and avoid imposing an identity that does not reflect how a person understands their own experience.

Person-Centred Language

Person-centred language shifts attention from labels toward the person and the language they use to describe their own experience. The literature identifies a movement toward language that is person-centred and strengths-based, including terms such as *survivor*, *thrivor*, and *person who experienced IPV* [2]. This approach recognizes that people may describe their experiences differently and that terminology should not unnecessarily define a person by the violence they have experienced.

Person-centred language can also be applied to descriptions of people who cause harm. Rather than reducing an individual to labels such as *abuser* or *perpetrator*, language such as *person using violence* or *person who caused harm* can distinguish the person from the behaviour [2]. This does not minimize responsibility for violence; rather, it can be a collaborative experience that emphasizes self-determination and encourages behavioural change [2].

The use of person-centred language therefore highlights description without unnecessary identity reduction. It allows terminology to remain precise about violence while recognizing that people have identities and experiences that extend beyond the violence being discussed.

Language and Agency

Beyond the choice of terms used to describe people, language can also influence how violence and the people involved in it are understood. Word choice can affect who is understood to have experienced harm, who is understood to have caused it, where the harm occurs, and what behaviours are recognized as violence [2].

Language can also contribute to awareness, mobilization, and the development of comprehensive responses to violence [2].

These considerations highlight the importance of agency in how experiences of violence are described. Terminology can position a person primarily in relation to the harm they experienced, while other language may draw greater attention to their actions, choices, or broader identity. Recognizing agency does not diminish the harm experienced or responsibility for violence; rather, it allows descriptions to acknowledge the complexity of people's experiences without reducing them to a single label.

Taken together, careful language can support more precise descriptions of violence while allowing people to be understood beyond the experience itself.

Gender, Intersectionality, and Inclusive Terminology

Terminology used to describe DV and IPV can also reflect assumptions about gender, identity, relationships, and whose experiences are recognized within definitions of violence. Gendered terminology can make patterns of gender inequality and power more visible, while intersectional approaches consider how multiple dimensions of identity and social position can shape experiences of violence. Inclusive terminology further requires attention to diverse intimate relationships and identities. Together, these perspectives demonstrate that terminology can broaden recognition while also raising important questions about scope and conceptual boundaries.

Gendered Terminology

Gender is an important dimension of how DV and IPV has been conceptualized and described. Yuvayapan [4] describes DV as potentially involving gendered patterns of abusive behaviours, including physical, sexual, emotional, economic, and psychological actions used to gain power over intimate people in families or relationships. Similarly, terminology such as *GBV* draws attention to violence that is connected to gender, gender identity, gender expression, or perceived gender, as well as to gender inequality and unequal power [5, 11, 12].

A gendered lens can therefore emphasize dimensions of violence that may be less apparent when terminology focuses only on the act or the relationship involved. It draws attention to power, gender norms, and inequality as relevant to understanding violence. This is particularly important because gender can influence how an event is interpreted and categorized. For example, a 2021 study found that female-perpetrated violence may be perceived as though it does not constitute IPV to the same extent as male-perpetrated violence [3].

At the same time, gendered terminology should not imply that violence is limited to one gender or one type of relationship. *GBV* identifies a particular dimension of violence but does not, by itself, describe the relationship between the people involved or the specific form of harm. Gender therefore represents an important lens for understanding violence rather than a complete description of every violent experience.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality provides a framework for understanding how multiple dimensions of identity and social position can operate together in experiences of violence. Drawing on Kimberlé Crenshaw's work, intersectionality can be understood as a framework for examining how various forms of inequality can operate together and exacerbate one another [16]. Identity markers such as gender, race, age, ethnicity, disability, social class, and sexual orientation overlap and do not exist in isolation [16].

Applied to DV, an intersectional approach recognizes that experiences of violence and responses to violence cannot always be understood through a single category of identity. From a DV lens, some people may be more at risk than others, while legal language and system responses can contribute to rendering women either invisible or protected [16].

The relevance to terminology is that a single category may not capture the full context of an experience. A term may identify gender while obscuring age or disability or identify an intimate partner relationship without accounting for other dimensions that shape a person's experience. Intersectionality therefore encourages consideration of how identity and social position overlap within experiences of violence and systems of response.

LGBTQ+ Inclusive Terminology

Inclusive terminology is particularly important when describing IPV across diverse sexual orientations and gender identities. LGBTQ+ people can experience IPV, sexual violence, and stalking at equal or greater likelihood than self-identified heterosexual people, with particularly high rates also identified among transgender individuals [9].

Terminology that assumes heterosexual, cisgender, or binary relationships can therefore create conceptual boundaries that do not reflect the range of intimate relationships in which violence occurs. The use of *IPV* can provide a broader relational term because it does not require a particular gender configuration or marital status. This is consistent with the Government of Canada's 2025 definition of IPV, which explicitly includes both heterosexual and LGBTQ2 relationships [5].

Inclusive terminology therefore requires attention to the assumptions embedded within definitions of intimate relationships. While some researchers frame LGBTQ+ IPV within diverse intimate relationships, others emphasize the importance of terminology that reflects how people understand and describe their own experiences [2, 9]. Inclusivity is consequently not limited to adding identity categories; it also involves avoiding assumptions about which relationship structures or identities are considered typical or default.

Inclusivity and Conceptual Boundaries

The literature demonstrates a tension between inclusivity and conceptual clarity. Broader terminology may encompass experiences that more narrowly defined terms overlook, but expanding a category can also make distinctions between relationships, forms of violence, or populations less precise.

This tension reflects the different dimensions emphasized by the terminology examined throughout this review. Terms such as IPV and FV establish relational boundaries, while gendered terminology introduces a different lens focused on gender, power, and inequality. Intersectionality further demonstrates that these categories can overlap, rather than operate independently. Lansdell et al. similarly emphasize the importance of inclusive terminology when connecting FV with diverse experiences and populations [2].

Inclusivity terminology therefore requires attention to both what a term includes and what its assumptions may leave less visible. Terminology that presumes cohabitation, marriage, heterosexuality, particular gender roles, or a single type of victim-perpetrator relationship may fail to capture all experiences. The goal is not to identify one universally applicable term, but to select terminology according to what is being described, and which dimensions of the experience need to remain visible.

This approach allows specificity and inclusivity to coexist, while recognizing that no single term can capture every dimension of domestic and interpersonal violence.

Language, Perception, and Consequences of Terminology

The effects of terminology become particularly evident when considering what follows from the application of a term. Language used to characterize an experience can affect whether it is recognized as violence, whether support is sought or accessed, how others interpret the event, how violence is operationalized in research, and how institutions respond.

Recognizing Violence

Terminology can influence whether individuals recognize an experience as violence or abuse and which behaviours are made visible. Terms that emphasize physical violence may draw attention to observable acts, while terminology that encompasses psychological, emotional, sexual, economic, or controlling behaviours can capture experiences that may not involve physical injury.

The terminology available to describe an experience can therefore influence how individuals understand what occurred. When language does not reflect the circumstances of an experience, recognition of that experience as violence or abuse may be more difficult.

Help-Seeking and Service Access

Terminology can also influence whether people seek support and whether services are perceived as relevant to their experiences. Comfort with terminology is associated with service access, help-seeking behaviours, and identifying behaviour as abusive [3].

When people do not identify with the language used by services, they may be less likely to understand their experiences as falling within the scope of available supports. Terminology can therefore create practical barriers even where services themselves are available. Conversely, language that reflects diverse relationships and forms of violence may make services more recognizable as relevant. This has implications for how organizations describe both violence and the people they support. Terms that assume relationship structures, living arrangements, or forms of harm may inadvertently narrow who is understood to be eligible for support.

Bystander Interpretation

Terminology can influence how violence is interpreted by people who are not directly involved in the experience. For example, different IPV-related terms carry different schemas and meanings for bystanders, and that identifying an event as IPV may influence what actions a bystander takes [3]. Interpretation can also vary according to characteristics of the people involved and the

circumstances surrounding an event. Factors including the gender of the person using violence, marital status, and whether violence was perceived as provoked or unprovoked influenced perceptions of violence [3].

These findings demonstrate that terminology operates alongside existing assumptions about violence. The language used to characterize an event can influence expectations about who is harmed, who is responsible, how serious the behaviour is, and what response is appropriate.

Research and Measurement

Terminological variation also creates challenges for research and measurement. The literature identifies inconsistency in terminology within the field, while demonstrating similar variation in terminology and definitions relating to intimate partner sexual violence [1, 3, 7].

Different terms can establish different boundaries around what is included within a category. Differentiation in terminology can occur depending on whether emphasis is placed on place, relationship, or behaviour [6]. These differences affect what researchers are describing and, consequently, what experiences are captured through measures.

Terminological consistency can therefore support clearer interpretation and comparison across research. Nonetheless, consistency should not come at the expense of meaningful distinctions between forms of violence or experiences. The challenge is to use terminology that is sufficiently consistent to support measurement while remaining sufficiently precise to capture differences in relationships, behaviours, and experiences.

Policy and Systems

Terminology also has implications for how violence is framed within policy, legal, media, and service systems. Language has a role in framing DV through legal and social dimensions, including representations that characterize violence as commonplace, an isolated incident, a criminal justice matter, or through victim-blaming narratives [4]. Additionally, legal language and system

responses can contribute to rendering some women invisible or protected. Terminology therefore has implications for more than communication; the categories used within systems can shape whose experiences are recognized within those systems.

The relationship between terminology and response is also evident in Nordin's finding that DV was associated more strongly with police intervention, whereas IPV, dating violence, and relationship aggression were associated more strongly with personal intervention [3]. Furthermore, police narratives often follow a 'violence' model wherein physical violence is considered more seriously than abusive behaviour that may or may not result in visible injury [15]. The term used to characterize an event may therefore contribute to expectations about who should respond and what type of response is appropriate.

Across these contexts, terminology has consequences beyond classification. It can affect whether experiences are recognized, whether support is accessed, how events are interpreted, what is measured, and how systems organize their responses. Terminology is therefore relevant not only to how violence is defined, but also to what becomes recognizable, measurable, and actionable.

Toward a Shared Language

The literature demonstrates that no single term can adequately capture every dimension of domestic and interpersonal violence. Different terms foreground different aspects of an experience, including the relationship between people, the nature of the harm, patterns of behaviour, gender and power, the role of technology, and the experiences and identities of those involved. A shared language should therefore not seek to replace this terminology with one universal term. Instead, it should provide a principled approach for selecting terminology according to what is being described and what needs to remain visible.

Precision

Precision requires terminology to accurately reflect the specific experience, relationship, behaviour, or context being described. As demonstrated

throughout this review, terms such as *DV*, *IPV*, *FV*, *sexual violence*, and *technology-facilitated violence* emphasize different dimensions of violence. Selecting among them should therefore depend on the focus of the communication rather than treating the terms as interchangeable.

Precision is particularly important when terminology establishes different conceptual boundaries. *IPV*, for example, identifies the intimate partner relationship, while *FV* can encompass a broader range of family relationships. Similarly, terms describing specific forms of harm can provide greater specificity than broader categories.

Precision does not necessarily require the use of the most technical or specific term available. Terminology should also be appropriate to its audience and purpose. The goal is to communicate accurately without creating unnecessary ambiguity or implying boundaries that do not apply to the experience being described.

Inclusivity

Inclusivity requires terminology to account for the diversity of relationships, identities, experiences, and circumstances in which violence can occur. The literature demonstrates that assumptions about cohabitation, marriage, heterosexuality, gender, age, disability, or other aspects of identity can narrow the experiences recognized by a term.

Inclusivity, however, does not mean removing all boundaries from terminology. A term that is made broadly inclusive may become less useful if it no longer communicates what is being described. Inclusive terminology therefore requires attention to who may be included or excluded by a term and which assumptions are embedded within its use.

Recognition of Power and Context

Terminology should also recognize that violence does not occur independently of relationships, power, social structures, or context. Terms that identify specific behaviours can describe what happened but may not fully communicate the

circumstances in which those behaviours occur or the relationships in which they take meaning.

A focus on power is particularly relevant to understanding patterns of violence, as well as context, including the social and structural conditions surrounding violence. Recognizing power and context therefore means avoiding terminology that treats violence solely as an isolated act. Where relevant, terminology should make visible the relationship in which harm occurs, the pattern or circumstances surrounding it, and the broader power dynamics that may shape the experience.

Consistency Without Oversimplification

A shared language requires sufficient consistency to support communication across organizations, services, research, and policy. At the same time, consistency should not require all forms of violence or all experiences of violence to be described using the same terminology.

The literature demonstrates considerable overlap among terms, but also meaningful distinctions in relationship, behaviour, form of harm, context, and identity. Eliminating these distinctions in the pursuit of a single standardized vocabulary could obscure information that is important for understanding and responding to violence. Conversely, using multiple terms inconsistently can create uncertainty about what is being described. The goal is therefore consistency in how terminology is selected and applied, rather than uniformity in the terms themselves. A shared approach can establish clear principles for choosing terminology while allowing the language to change according to the purpose and context of communication.

Considerations for The Brenda Strafford Foundation

The literature reviewed in this paper demonstrates that terminology should be selected deliberately according to what is being described, whose experience is being represented, and which dimensions of

violence need to remain visible. For the Brenda Strafford Foundation (BSF), these findings provide a basis for developing a more consistent approach to terminology across research, communications, programs, policy, and external engagement. The following considerations are intended to support organizational consistency while allowing terminology to remain responsive to context and audience.

Establish a Core Organizational Approach

BSF may benefit from establishing a core approach to terminology that identifies preferred terms for common contexts while recognizing that no single term will be appropriate in every circumstance. A shared approach could distinguish between broad organizational language and terminology used when greater specificity is required.

For example, *DV*, *IPV*, and *FV* may be appropriate in different contexts depending on the relationship or setting being described. Similarly, terms such as *sexual violence*, *psychological abuse*, *coercive control*, and *technology-facilitated violence* can provide additional specificity when the nature or mechanism of harm is relevant.

The purpose of a core approach would therefore be consistency in decision-making rather than uniformity in language. This would allow BSF to use terminology intentionally while avoiding the assumption that terms with overlapping meanings are interchangeable in every context.

Match Terminology to Purpose and Audience

Terminology should be selected according to the purpose of the communication and the audience receiving it. Academic and research contexts may require greater conceptual precision, while public-facing materials may require language that is more familiar and immediately understandable.

This distinction is particularly relevant where technical terminology may not be widely understood. Terms such as *IPV* or *coercive control* may provide important conceptual specificity but may require explanation when used with general audiences. Conversely, broader terminology may be more accessible but can obscure the relationship, behaviour, or form of harm being discussed.

Use Person-Centred and Inclusive Language

Organizational language should avoid unnecessarily defining people by their experiences of violence. Where appropriate, BSF can use person-centred language, including terms such as *person who experienced violence*, *survivor*, or *person using violence*, while recognizing that individuals may prefer different terminology.

Language should also account for diverse relationships and identities. Definitions and communications should avoid assumptions that violence occurs only within heterosexual relationships, between people who live together, or within family structures.

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

Preserve Recognition of Power and Context

BSF's terminology should also remain attentive to power, relationships, and context. Describing an act without considering the circumstances in which it occurs may provide an incomplete account of the experience.

Where relevant, terminology should therefore make visible the relationship between the people involved, patterns of behaviour, and broader social or structural factors. This is particularly important when communicating about violence that may otherwise be interpreted as an isolated interpersonal conflict.

A context-sensitive approach also supports BSF's broader commitment to recognizing diverse experiences of violence.

Support Consistency Across Organizational Outputs

A shared terminology approach could be applied across BSF's research and evaluation, public communications, educational materials, policies, partnerships, and knowledge mobilization activities. Consistency across these areas can reduce ambiguity and help ensure that the same terms are not used to mean substantially different things without explanation.



This does not require every document to use identical terminology. Rather, BSF could establish a small set of principles for terminology selection and encourage teams to document or define terms when their meaning may not be immediately clear.

A practical organizational resource could include:

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

Review Terminology Over Time

Terminology in the domestic and interpersonal violence field continues to evolve. Changes in research, legislation, policy, community language, and lived experience can influence how terms are understood and applied. BSF's terminology approach should therefore be treated as an adaptable organizational resource rather than a fixed vocabulary.

Periodic review would allow BSF to consider emerging terminology, changes in evidence, and feedback from people with lived and living experience, community partners, researchers, and relevant sectors. This would also provide an opportunity to identify terms that have developed new meanings or that may no longer reflect current understandings.

Ultimately, the goal is not to identify a single “correct” term for domestic and interpersonal violence. The literature instead supports a deliberate, consistent, inclusive, and context-sensitive approach to language. For BSF, developing such an approach can strengthen clarity across organizational work while

ensuring that terminology continues to reflect the complexity of violence and the experiences of the people affected by it.

Conclusion

Terminology is an important component of how domestic and interpersonal violence is understood, described, researched, and addressed. This review demonstrates that terms such as *DV*, *IPV*, and *FV* overlap in important ways while emphasizing different relationships and contexts. Other terminology draws attention to specific forms or mechanisms of harm, including sexual violence, psychological and emotional abuse, coercive control, and technology-facilitated violence. Language also influences how the people involved are described, including whether emphasis is placed on victimization, survival, agency, or personhood.

Across the literature, terminology is not consistently bounded. Definitions vary across research, policy, practice, and public discourse, and terms may be used differently depending on the context in which they are applied. These differences do not necessarily indicate that one term is correct, and another is incorrect. Rather, they demonstrate the importance of being deliberate about what a term identifies, what it makes visible, and what it may leave less visible.

A shared approach to terminology should therefore balance precision, inclusivity, person-centred language, recognition of power and context, and consistency without oversimplification. Terminology should be selected according to the relationship, behaviour, form of harm, context, and purpose being described, while remaining attentive to diverse experiences and the language people use to describe themselves.

For BSF, the literature provides a foundation for developing an organizational approach that supports greater clarity across research, communications, education, policy, and knowledge mobilization. Such an approach does not require identifying one universally preferred term. Instead, it can establish principles for using terminology intentionally and consistently while preserving the complexity of domestic and interpersonal violence.



Ultimately, the goal of shared language is not simply to standardize words. It is to ensure that the language used to describe violence is sufficiently clear to recognize harm, sufficiently inclusive to reflect diverse experiences, and sufficiently precise to support appropriate understanding and response.

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