

## **“I Didn’t Know He Had It in Him to Kill Me”: Nonlethal Firearms Use and Partner Violence Against Canadian Women**

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*This qualitative research explored with women the nature and impact of non-lethal firearm related assaults inflicted on them by their male partners. Forty women from Alberta, Canada described incident(s) in which firearms were central, with 5 contextual themes emerging: (a) threats by partners to commit suicide with firearms (4 women); (b) indirect threats (6 women); (c) explicit threats to harm with a firearm without producing the weapon (11 women); (d) one traumatic incident involving firearms (12 women); and (e) firearm threats or used throughout the relationship (7 women). Practice and policy options are presented for forensic and clinical social workers, shelter workers and police officers.*

The serious issue of women being abused by male intimate partners has been brought to the awareness of the Canadian public through repeated national studies (Statistics Canada, 2013). Women are commonly threatened with death or harm by abusive partners, often because of sexual jealousy (Wilson, Johnson, & Daly, 1995; Johnson, 2006) or when a woman contemplates or has left the relationship (Brownridge, 2006; Fleury, Sullivan, & Bybee, 2000). Nonetheless, despite concerns about women being murdered by intimate partners, femicides have declined over the past several decades in both Canada (Dawson, Bunge, & Balde, 2009) and the United States (Puzone, Saltzman, Kresnow, Thompson, & Mercy, 2000). According to Canadian statistics on spousal homicides between 1978 and 2007 (Statistics Canada, 2009, pp. 48–49), the rate of four spousal homicides per million spouses in 2007 was the lowest in 30 years. However, women remain more

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likely to be murdered by current or former partners than men; of 65 spousal homicides in 2007, 51 women were killed by spouses compared to 14 men.

What little we know about firearms involvement in intimate partner violence (IPV) has primarily been extrapolated from studies on spousal homicide in which possessing firearms was identified as a risk factor (Arbuckle et al., 1996; Bailey et al., 1995; Campbell et al., 2003; Roberts, 2009; Wiebe, 2003). Nevertheless, women are also at risk of homicide from other weapons such as knives (Lee, Zhang, & Hoover, 2013). A Statistics Canada report (2009) documented that Canadian women and men are murdered by their partners using different weapons: Male spouses primarily die from stabbing (71%) whereas women were substantially more likely to be killed because of physical force (38%; beatings, strangulation, suffocation, or drowning). The women were also stabbed (30%) or shot (28%). In 1996, 27 firearm-related spousal homicides were recorded compared to nine in 2007.

In comparison, in the United States, “Guns are the agents of homicide in the majority of IP homicides” (Campbell, Glass, Sharps, Laughon, & Bloom, 2007, p. 255) with handguns the weapon of choice. According to Vigdor and Mercy (2006), considering that one in three American women homicide victims are murdered by partners or ex-partners, approximately 60% of these are firearms deaths. Among other factors that differentiate Canada and the United States, firearms ownership is much less in Canada (about 31 gun owners for every 100 citizens) compared to the United States (89 per 100; Bangalore, & Messerli, 2013).

Legislative initiatives to reduce firearms use with family members and intimates such as conducting background checks on those applying for gun registration have been developed in both Canada and the United States. However, several authors suggest that there is insufficient evidence to conclude that these are effective (Frattaroli & Vernick, 2006; Hahn et al., 2005). In Canada, McPhedran and Mauser (2013) found little evidence that restrictions on firearms access were responsible for the reduction in spousal homicides.

Although several authors have noted that firearms use in intimate partner assaults seems relatively rare (Brzozowski, 2004; Folkes, Hilton, & Harris, 2012; Kernsmith & Craun, 2008), there has been virtually no research specific to IPV in which the assaultive partner uses or threatens the use of firearms. Folkes et al. (2012, pp. 1143–1144) concluded that firearms use is more typical in a subgroup of offenders whose IPV tends to be severe.

Although those who work closely with women abused by intimate partners, such as forensic social workers and advocates in shelters, are likely aware of the ways in which firearms threats impact abused women, little published research addresses this. In one of the few studies specific to gun ownership among abusive men, Sorenson and Wiebe (2004) interviewed 417 California women in 67 shelters about weapons involvement. “About one-third of the battered women had a firearm in the home. In two thirds

of these households, the intimate partner used the gun(s) against the woman, usually threatening to shoot/kill her (71.4%) or to shoot at her (5.1%).” The number of firearms in the homes of women whose partners abused them was higher than that of the general population.

It is important for forensic social workers, such as those who partner with police in specialized domestic violence teams or who counsel mandated perpetrators and victims of IPV, to understand how firearms are threatened or used in non-lethal ways as these could easily become lethal. Few researchers have inquired about firearms involvement in IPV, thus we know little about the experiences of women living in abusive relationships where firearms are used or threatened, the focus of the current study.

As Wilson et al. (1995) usefully pointed out, one cannot necessarily generalize the characteristics of lethal violence against women to non-lethal incidents. Learning more about the dynamics of intimate partner abuse when firearms are implicated could be invaluable for forensic and clinical social workers to help women better strategize ways to protect themselves and their children. This is especially true given the general lack of knowledge of social work students on the nature of or interventions to address violence against women (Black, Weisz, & Bennett 2010; McMahan, Postmus, Warrenner, Plummer, & Schwartz, 2013). The results could also inform policy and practice of service providers such as shelter staff and members of the justice system.

## METHOD

The current research used case study qualitative methodology (Brandell & Varkas, 2010) to explore nonlethal firearms incidents involving women abused by intimate partners to assess their nature and impact. To facilitate access to interviewees with firearms involvement, the women were referred by either members of the special domestic abuse police/forensic social worker teams from the cities of Edmonton and Calgary, Alberta, Canada or Violence Against Women shelter staff. Because the funders had specified a 4-month time period for data collection, as many women were interviewed as possible in this short timeframe (convenience sample).

Ethics approval from the University of Calgary Conjoint Ethics Review Board was obtained. To ensure safety and confidentiality, the service providers initially contacted each woman to assure her willingness to be interviewed and any special safety requirements. Although not included in the current article, 23 service providers were also interviewed about their experiences working with women who have had firearms used or threatened (Tutty, 1999).

I collected the data through in-depth semistructured interviews either in person or by telephone conducted by myself, a feminist social worker with

over 30 years of clinical and research experience in IPV. Questions were about the abusive nature of the relationship, the nature and context of the firearms involvement, the impact of the firearms involvement, whether the women had contacted the police in response to the firearm incidents, and the justice system response. The interviews lasted from 1 to 2.5 hours.

The interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and mainstream qualitative data analysis was applied (Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Patton, 2002). The interviews were entered into the computer program ATLAS-ti to organize the analysis. The constant comparison method (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Thorne, 2000) was used in first and second-level coding. First level coding entails word-by-word, line-by-line scrutiny of the transcripts to identify prominent themes and subthemes. Second-level coding looks within the themes and subthemes to identify similarities, differences and gaps (Coleman & Unrau, 1996).

Analysis of the 40 interviews provided a wealth of themes and subthemes. The current document focuses on the nature of the abusive relationships both broadly and specially related to the firearms incidents and their impact. To comprehensively examine these core issues, themes related to women's interactions with the police, forensic social workers, and the shelter system are documented elsewhere (Tutty, 1999).

## RESULTS

### The Women's Demographics

Forty women were interviewed. Eleven (about one-quarter) were referred by the police spousal abuse units; the other 29 women were referred by shelter staff from 10 Alberta shelters (eight emergency, two second stage). While the women were all Alberta residents when interviewed, not all of the incidents took place in the province.

The 40 women were an average age of 37 years (see Table 1). In terms of racial background, about four-fifths (33) women were Caucasian, and the other less than one-fifth (seven women) were Aboriginal or Métis. The women were, on the whole, highly educated. Over three quarters (77.5%) were high school graduates or had some postsecondary training or education. Of those who were working, a little less than one-third were employed in clerical or retail jobs, a little more than one-third worked in technical areas such chemical or engineering technicians or teaching assistants, and another little more than one-third were professionals, including four nurses, a chemist, and an engineer. With respect to sources of income, almost half had full-time jobs (17 or 42.5%) and another two (5%) worked part-time. Another almost half (19 or 47.5%) were on social assistance or disability and two women (5%) were students. In comparison to other research on abused women in Alberta, most of whom had sought emergency shelter

**TABLE 1** Demographics for the Women and Their Partners

Variable	Women ( <i>n</i> = 40)	Male partners
Average age	37 years (range = 19 to 53)	42 years (range = 25 to 65)
Racial		
Caucasian	33 (82.5%)	31 (77.5%)
back-ground Aboriginal or M��tis	7 (17.5%)	9 (22.5%)
Education		
Up to Grade 8	3 (7.5%)	8 (19.5%)
Some high school	6 (15.4%)	11 (26.8%)
High school graduate	13 (32.5%)	6 (14.6%)
Some postsecondary	9 (22.5%)	5 (12.2%)
College/university degree	9 (22.5%)	0
Job/work experience	<i>n</i> = 26	<i>n</i> = 37
Clerical/retail	8 (30.7%)	0
Technical/semiskilled	9 (34.6%)	5 (13.5%)
Professional	9 (34.6%)	2 (5.4%)
Laborer/construction	0	14 (37.8%)
Business owner/consultant	0	9 (24.3%)
Farmer	0	5 (13.5%)
Criminal activities	0	2 (5.4%)
Previous couple relationship	<i>n</i> = 38	<i>n</i> = 32
No	24 (63.2%)	18 (56%)
Yes	14 (36.8%); 3 were abusive (21%)	14 (34.1%); 13 abusive (93%)

(Tutty, Weaver & Rothery, 1999; Tutty, Ogden, Giurgiu & Weaver-Dunlop, 2013), the research respondents were a well-educated group with an unusually high number of professionals.

The women were abused by intimate partners (all male) with whom they had been married (26 or 65%), lived common-law (12 or 30%), or were dating (2 or 5%). The partner relationships lasted an average of 10 years (*SD* = 7.8) ranging from 4 months to 33 years. For almost two-thirds, this was their first marital/common-law relationship. The other third (14 women) had previously been in long-term relationships (13 married; one common-law). Of the previous liaisons, only three women had been abused by prior partners, contrary to the stereotype that abused women leave one abusive partner only to connect with another abusive man.

With respect to marital status when the firearms incident/s occurred, eight women had been separated or divorced from their partners for periods of from half a year to 11 years. Several were stalked by these partners; some had moved across Canada to escape. The remaining 32 women (80%) were living with their partners when threatened with firearms, although, when interviewed, only two of these were still co-habiting. In one case, the incident had occurred years previously: The partner had not threatened gun use since and his abusive behavior had decreased substantially. The other woman had returned to care for her ex-partner who had become ill.

The majority of the women had children, whose average age was 14.7 years (range of from 3 to 33). Over half (21 women or 52.5%) had two or three children, nine (22.5%) had four to seven children and six women (15%) had one child. Four women (10%) had no children.

While the police services and most of the shelters that referred women respondents were in urban centers, about half of the women (21 or 52.5%) lived exclusively in rural Alberta, whereas slightly less than half (16 or 40%) lived exclusively in urban settings. The final three women (7.5%) lived in a mix of locations with more time spent in rural communities.

### The Demographics of the Partners

Because the women provided the information on the partner's backgrounds, it was often incomplete or possibly inaccurate since the women did not have access to details about the partner's past or current activities, nor were they necessarily told the truth. According to the women, the men were an average of 42 years of age. Two-thirds (31 men) were Caucasian and nine (22.5%) were Aboriginal. In comparison to the women, the men had much less formal education: Almost half (46.3%) had not completed high school. Over one-third worked in labor/construction; nine men owned their own businesses or were consultants, five were technicians or semiskilled workers, and five were farmers. Only two partners were professionals and two were solely involved in criminal activities. Of note, two partners were police officers and two were members of the armed forces with special assault weapons training.

As can be seen in Table 1, of the 36 men for whom the women gave information on work status when the firearms incidents took place, almost two-thirds were employed either full- or part-time. A small number were unemployed and looking for work, and others were on disability for health problems such as posttraumatic stress or a heart condition. Only one man was receiving social assistance. In the 32 cases with information about previous relationships, 56% of the men had not been in long-term partnerships before. Of the rest, 13 of 14 men (93%) were known to have abused their previous partners.

Excluding assaults against the current partner, 23 men (57.5%) had previously been charged with criminal offences. Nine men had spent time in prison for these non-spousal assaults with terms ranging from 6 months to 10 years. The women were not necessarily aware of their partner's criminal histories since many of the charges were laid before the relationships began. Some women heard about previous criminal charges only after they had called the police or left the relationship. After separating, two women learned that their husbands were still legally married to previous partners.

Over half of the women (22 or 55%) considered their partners to have serious substance abuse problems: Another 18 respondents (45%) did not see their partners as abusing substances; several commented that their partners were always completely sober when they abused them. Almost

one-third of the partners (13 or 32.5%) were known to have been treated or received psychiatric attention. Six had reportedly been diagnosed as depressed, three as having an antisocial personality disorder, two were diagnosed with bipolar disorder, and another two men were described as displaying paranoid tendencies.

### Beyond Firearms: The Nature of the Abusive Relationships

To provide a broader context with respect to the 40 women who agreed to be interviewed because their partners used or threatened firearms, this section examines the general nature of the abuse that the men inflicted on them, describing various forms of emotional, physical, and sexual assaults mostly irrespective of the firearms. Direct quotes from the interviews exemplify the seldom-heard voices of these women, bearing witness to disturbing narratives of their partner's actions during private interactions.

According to the women, the partners emotionally abused all of them. With respect to the form of emotional abuse, a little over half (23 or 57.5%) described their partners as extremely jealous and as imagining that the women were having affairs, although each woman denied this. The most extreme example of this was a man who inspected his wife's private parts when she came home and insisted that she could only bathe with him, not alone. Much of the emotional abuse (13 women or 32.5%) was ongoing, including severely denigrating comments such as being called "fat," "ugly," "cunt," "whore," and "slut."

Twelve women (30%) described extreme controlling behavior that, for some, meant accounting for every minute spent outside the home and, for others, entailed being given cell phones so that he could always find out where she was and what she was doing. Many women were restricted from spending time with family members or women friends. Nine (22.5%) described financial abuse such that their partners had virtual control over the bank accounts once she handed her cheque over to him. One partner told his wife who had asked for \$5.00 that she should "go down to the stroll and make her own money."

Another woman, who worked out of town to her partner's displeasure, received a phone message from him claiming that their young child was hit by a car and in hospital. She drove home in shock, only to discover that he had fabricated the story to force her return home. Two men who were separated repeatedly broke into their homes at night to wake up their terrified spouses. One informed his partner that he'd hidden a gun somewhere in the house, both alarming her and ignoring the fact that their young children might come across the weapon.

Six of the 40 men had not physically abused the women: Another six women were hurt several times throughout the relationship, describing having been "pushed and hit," "bruised her hand," and "held down and threatened to break both wrists." The remaining 28 women (70%) described

ongoing physical violence that could have resulted in their deaths. The women had knives thrown at them, were pushed into walls or down stairs, had their heads repeatedly beaten into the floor fracturing cheekbones, were kicked in the face or private parts, and had bones broken. The partners of 10 women strangled them to the point where two barely survived the experience. Several women were locked outside in the dead of winter, or restrained inside the house if he was away. One woman was tied to the bed to keep her from leaving; another was slashed across the chest with a knife, requiring 27 stitches. The physical abuse endured by most of the women respondents was repeated, brutal, and life threatening.

Without considering the firearms incident, over two-thirds of the 40 women were threatened with death, although the men did not necessarily specify that they would use firearms to commit the homicides. In seven cases the men threatened to kill others as well, including children ( $n = 4$ ) and other family members ( $n = 3$ ). A relatively high proportion (17 or 42.5%) of the men threatened to commit suicide as well as harming the women and/or others.

The partners of half of the women forced sex on them. Five were raped once or several times; the other 17 were sexually assaulted repeatedly. As a consequence, one woman suffered such severe internal damage that she can no longer bear children. Three of these women were also pressured into degrading sexual acts. Of the 38 women whose partners had the opportunity to stalk them after a marital separation, two-thirds followed them, made numerous harassing phone-calls or embarked on concerted efforts to destroy their reputations.

In summary, it is essential to acknowledge the extremely abusive nature of the relationships in which firearms were a part. The firearm threat against the women interviewed for this research was only one aspect of the abuse; for some, not the worst.

## The Nature and Impact of the Firearms Involvement

This section presents specifics about the firearms involvement, first describing the women's partners' firearms and then examining five different ways in which these were used abusively. Not all of the firearms incidents were current. Although 30 women (75%) reported that the firearms incident/s had occurred in the past 2 years, six of the incidents (15%) happened 3 to 4 years ago and four (10%) took place between 8 to 24 years earlier.

The majority of the men owned more than one firearm (an average of 5.8,  $SD = 9.5$ ; range of 0 to 50). According to the women, the most common reason that their partners owned firearms was for hunting and farming/recreation. Four men were gun collectors and four used firearms for criminal activities such as drug dealing. Finally, the two police officers often brought their service revolvers home after working late shifts.



Three women themselves owned firearms. One had learned to target shoot as a recreational activity with her husband, another was pressured into obtaining a rifle on behalf of her partner who was restricted from firearm ownership, and a final woman owned a handgun.

In nine instances (22.5%), the women knew or suspected that some of their partner's weapons were prohibited and two men (5%) who were restricted from firearms ownership, nonetheless had firearms. The prohibited weapons included sawed-off shotguns and semi- and automatic weapons. In each case, the men had prior criminal charges, although another 12 men with past charges did not own prohibited firearms. In terms of the involvement of substances in the firearms episodes, no information was available on five partners (12.5%), half of the remaining 36 men (18 or 45% of the total 40) were described as "drunk" or "high on drugs," another 32.5% (13 men) were sober, with 10% (4 men) "sometimes" using substances.

Although all of the firearms incidents were serious and potentially lethal, considering the nature of the most significant firearm event, the context of the firearm involvement fell into five categories: (a) threats by partners to commit suicide with firearms (four women); (b) indirect threats by a partner to harm with a firearm (six women); (c) explicit threats to harm with a firearm without actually producing the weapon (11 women); (d) relationships culminating in one traumatic incident involving firearm pointing or shooting (12 women); and (e) relationships in which the gun was used to either threaten or to actually shoot at the women throughout their relationships (seven women). It must be emphasized that these categories are not mutually exclusive. For example, as noted earlier, threats by the partner to commit suicide were, in fact, common (42.5% or 17 men). Similarly, when partners made explicit threats to harm with firearms, they often also had made vague threats. As such, the categories include women who had experienced the "least" threat. For example, the women whose narratives were in the category of suicide threats, did not disclose vague or direct threats from firearms and never had firearms used against them.

The following sections consist of direct quotations from the women respondents in each of the five categories of the most serious firearms involvement. The quotes first describe the firearms incidents and then the impact of these on the women within each category. The impact on the women irrespective of the type of firearms incident is summarized in the discussion.

#### THREATS TO COMMIT SUICIDE

Four women described the most serious incident involving firearms as their partners threatening to kill themselves. This raised, for the first time, the possibility that they or others could be shot as well. In two cases when the men threatened suicide they also pointed the firearm at their partner. In one of these, the rifle was pointed only momentarily; in another, her partner

wildly waved a rifle around for over a half-hour, so it was often pointed in her direction. The following quote exemplifies these women's experiences.

He would pull out the gun, load it and say he was going to kill himself. He would unload them when things calmed down. After a while, he didn't even put them away. The last night, he took his shotgun out, loaded it, and pointed it at me, not for very long, only seconds. I knew that it wasn't really me he was "pointing" at, but I was scared for my life. Then he kneeled down and put the barrel in his mouth. He finally stopped.

The impact of the suicide threats on these four women varied. Two whose partners put the barrel of a rifle in their mouths were clearly fearful afterwards, in one case that he might complete the act, in another for her own safety after he was arrested and charged with assault and drug dealing. One woman perceived the suicide threat as quite genuine: "[Did you think he might commit suicide?] I was really scared about that. When I finally left, I was so concerned that I called his closest friend to make sure someone would be there when he got home. The day I left, I took his shotguns with me." The woman who described the one incident when her partner had threatened suicide while waving a rifle wildly around for over half an hour commented about the impact on her: "He still has both (firearms). If he were to harm himself that would have a bearing on my son and me, even if we were not harmed. You're extremely vulnerable. I was very, very in shock. It took two full weeks to get out of blind fear." When the husband threatened suicide but without a firearm in hand, the woman was not as fearful, seeing the threats as more to control her and the children. Nonetheless, he had also told her that he had thoughts of killing each of the kids, her and himself.

#### INDIRECT THREATS TO HARM WITH FIREARMS

In six relationships, the men, all firearm owners, made indirect or vague threats to harm their partners without specifying that they would use firearms. In several cases, the men made innuendoes that would be difficult to verify or could be interpreted as innocuous, such as saying, "I'm going to take you down," or "watch your back." The common-law partner of one woman kept a loaded .22 in their house and made gun threats with respect to his associates. While he never threatened her with the firearm, he had choked her until she almost passed out. Two women recited their partner's indirect threats.

He sexually assaulted me many times. When we're in bed and he's within an arm's reach of a gun, you know the rules. He'd say, "It was really neat when I got that deer last week. Man, I blew his head off!" It wasn't like he said, "I'm going to shoot you." You don't need to say that.

The neighbours upset him so he threatened them with a loaded shotgun. He would say, "In Canada husbands often kill wives." When wanted a divorce, he said, "I will bury you in one year, maybe earlier."

The impact of these indirect or vague threats was significant: "I live in fear every day and continually suffer from insomnia. Right now, he's under observance by my lawyer, but when the case is over, I'm very afraid what will happen. Fear, panic attacks, numbness, sheer terror that I was going to die at any time, or he was going to take the children."

#### DIRECT THREATS TO KILL USING FIREARMS

Eleven men verbalized threats to kill their partners using firearms or gestured their intention to do so. These men did not physically bring out their firearms but clearly voiced their willingness to do so. The nature of the abuse in these relationships was more serious and life threatening than the relationships in which the threats were indirect or the partners had threatened suicide. Nine of the eleven men threatened to kill their partners, whether with firearms or other weapons. One threatened to shoot his wife's relatives. One man "stuck a screwdriver in my neck and said, 'This is how it would feel if I gave you a tracheotomy.'" A final partner "threatened to pour gasoline over me and light me on fire." Quotes specific to the direct firearms threats included the following:

When he was really mad, he'd say, "Where's my gun, I'll end this right now." He'd go to find his gun; he never actually came back with it.

He'd think maybe I had a boyfriend and we were sleeping together. He said, "I couldn't shut my mind off. I got dressed and came into town to kill you. I had it all planned out."

Drinking one night, jealous and fighting he said, "If I had a gun I'd blow your head off."

Having one's life threatened directly with a firearm when one's partner owns a gun, especially with concurrent brutal physical abuse, had a significant impact on all eleven women.

I still have that fear (three years later). Two days ago, I thought someone was in my car, maybe with a gun. All days I have that fear. All days, when my son doesn't call, I worry.

I was very scared. When I left I hid all of his guns and his ammunition, and he didn't find them for a long time. [Where did you hide them?] In the dog house.

## ONE SIGNIFICANT INCIDENT INVOLVING FIREARM USE

Twelve women reported single incidents with firearm involvement. Each was threatened with death while the partners were either pointing a firearm ( $n = 5$ ), holding it to her head ( $n = 4$ ), or actually shooting the weapon at her ( $n = 3$ ). In none of these instances was the woman wounded.

When the firearms incident took place, eight women were still with their partners but another four had been separated for from 1 month (in shelter) to over 10 years. In all but one partnership, the men had used substantial physical abuse. Quotations with respect to one-time gun use are documented below:

He tried to start an argument. I said, "I'm going to go out if you're going out." He ran to the spare room where he kept the guns and loaded it. I was in the living room with the laundry basket and he came in with the gun pointed at me and he shot above my head. He was going back to reload and I ran after him and screamed. He told me, if I went to the police, he'd go to jail and when he got out, he would kill me.

He went downstairs to where he had a gun, got bullets and loaded it, and stood at the end of the bed screaming that I'd ruined his family. He'd kill me first and I'd never leave. I said, "Are you going to shoot me now?" He said, "Yes" and he fired. It was close. I thought he'd shot me. It went through the headboard probably two inches from my head.

Six of the 12 men declared that they would commit suicide after killing their wives:

He told me, "If you ever call the cops again, I'll take their pistol, shoot you, shoot them, and shoot myself."

He would say, if I left, he would find me and kill me and he'd kill anyone I was with because if he couldn't have me, nobody could. Then he'd kill himself.

Regarding the impact of this one significant incident, several women claimed that the gun involvement had not affected them greatly or that another event was more powerful in them recognizing the danger they were in:

He kept the bullet-hole for a reminder; he filled it over, but never painted it [he worked in construction]. He said that the beatings helped me understand him. He was so right.

It was a one-gun incident. My initial thought was, "How could he be so irresponsible?" He was a gun collector and I never felt danger. Even when I went back the second time, I never felt danger. The flashbacks are not about the guns. The main one is when he had his fist in my face; hearing him shoot. He didn't shoot the dog; he shot by him.

Several women expressed profound impacts in response to the firearms incident:

This dreadful incident changed my life forever. I have never felt so personally hurt, so hopeless, so vulnerable, so humiliated and degraded. My entire body and soul ache. I'm just lucky to be alive. I now know what it is to be scared and fearful for one's life.

Afterwards I knew that he could kill me. I'd never had that fear before. I knew that he could hurt me, he could crack a rib or bruise me, but I didn't know he had it in him to kill me. I knew that then [when he fired his rifle at her].

The important issue for other women was not so much the firearm, but the intent to kill, irrespective of what weapon was threatened:

I don't think the gun is necessarily the problem. The problem is these men walking around like time bombs. I was equally afraid of him when he came home with a hatchet.

[What was the worst incident?] When he held a gun to my head? No. I didn't think he was going to fire. The worst incident was in the last six months. He was choking me and I was absolutely dying. He was not going to stop and I could feel my life slipping away.

#### ONGOING THREATS OF FIREARMS USE

Seven women described relationships throughout which they were threatened with or feared firearms use. The length of the relationships of these couples ranged from 7 to 25 years. The nature of the partner violence was severe throughout. Five women repeatedly experienced marital rape; two partners raped women at gunpoint.

In every instance, the lives of the women were directly threatened and, in four, other family members or friends were mentioned as potential targets. In most of the seven cases, the men owned a substantial number of firearms: two men were collectors with 25 and 17 firearms respectively. One woman claimed that her partner had about 10 rifles lying around the house loaded, another had four or five rifles, some loaded, even though both had small children.

He'd sit on the couch with his guns around him. He had guns by the door a pistol on the coffee table. He used to want to play war games with live ammo and see who came back.

He'd keep one (rifle) in the porch, one in the bedroom, in the closet up in a corner. I was scared because when he started drinking, he'd pull out the guns. He'd have his brothers and cousins over drinking. They'd start talking about hunting and he'd get his gun, pointing and waving it around. [What would he point it at?] Me.

In comparison to the relatively high number of men who threatened suicide in the other categories, only two of the seven men described in this category threatened to take their own lives by attempting to force their partners into shooting them: "He said, 'When we get home, I'll give you a gun and if you don't kill me, you'll stay with me the rest of your life.'" He'd make me hold the gun to his head, saying, 'C'mon, you hate me. Shoot me.'" Two women considered using firearms against their partners but did not:

I sat on the edge of the bed one night with my gun thinking, "I'm going to kill him when he's asleep and then I'll kill myself." I sat there for a long time.

We had a big fight and he threatened me and I ran for the gun. He took it away from me, thank goodness. [Did you point it at him?] I couldn't even get it loaded.

The women were asked about the impact of their partner's ongoing use of or threats to use firearms. Several had stayed in the relationships for long periods, enduring brutal physical and sexual assaults, believing that they would be in greater danger if they left than if they stayed.

It was too close to killing me. It's easy to pull the trigger at a distance; to kill someone by fists is harder. A weapon is too easy and then it's too late. He knows how to use weapons.

He never said goodbye, just took his suitcase and left. For two weeks I hardly slept. I kept expecting him to ambush me. I still watch my rear-view mirror. I started wearing wigs and traded vehicles with friends. I could picture him outside with a rifle when I went to work: A long-range rifle, and he'd blow my head all over the place.

Others stated that being threatened with a firearm made little difference considering the other abuse that their partners had inflicted on them:

He could have snapped my neck with one hand. He could pick me up and throw me across the room with one hand. The weapons were just another threat. To me, it was, "Good, it's quicker than being tortured."

I worried about the gun more in relation to my friends. With my partner, intimidation was more important than harming anybody. Hitting some-

body feels more powerful than standing there with a gun, not doing anything. You get used to having guns in the house.

After leaving, all seven women continued to live in fear that their ex-partners would find them. Five were in hiding from their abusive partners and had taken significant steps to conceal their whereabouts, including moving across Canada. One woman's partner had left the country and because his criminal record came to light, is unlikely to return. Two women had been stalked for one and seven years respectively:

If he finds me, there's nothing that I can do. That will be the end. [He'll kill you?] I know he will. It's hard to say sometimes, but I have to say it.

I went looking for my son at my partner's home. He kept me there for a couple of nights. He burned my feet with cigarettes so that I wouldn't run away. My feet were swollen and purple and I was in great pain. My left eye was bruised and swollen. He told me that the shelter staff were brain-washing me; that pinching and little burns were not abuse.

He called my grandmother. She phoned the shelter and told me, "Don't go outside, he's looking for you." I was terrified. He was mad and who knows what he would have done.

## DISCUSSION

As little has been published about the experiences and reactions of women abused by intimate partners who threaten or use firearms against them, the current study has potential to inform practice and policy. The interviews provide a chilling view of the intimate details of abusive partner relationships. In general, the women were severely abused physically, emotionally, and often sexually, consistent with Folkes et al. (2012). All believed that their lives were threatened and, in a number of instances, their partner also directly threatened the lives of other family members, friends, or beloved pets.

That the women's firearms narratives went beyond their partner's direct threats to shoot and actually firing the weapon was not anticipated by the author before the interviews commenced. Nonetheless, these dynamics are critical in understanding women's safety. Partners threatening suicide has been noted as a risk factor in studies of spousal homicide (Campbell et al., 2003) but the fact that it was mentioned in almost half of the relationships in the current study with men who had access to firearms reaffirms its importance. In addition, though, this study highlights vague and indirect threats to harm with firearms as aspects to assess when assisting abused women.

The increased danger when a firearm is used to threaten death or is fired on women, children or the partner himself was generally acknowledged by the women. The threat of death is an important marker of the escalation to a new level of violence and emotional manipulation and gun ownership raises the risk of femicide substantially (Campbell et al., 2007; Wiebe, 2003).

Whether the firearms were involved directly or indirectly, the impact on most women was one of fear. However, similar to other IPV research that identified that many women survive in abusive relationships by numbing themselves to fear and threats (Tutty, 2015), several women in the current study denied the danger of having been threatened or had firearms used against them. This was especially so when the threats were indirect or vague.

However, although the five categories of firearms involvement can be seen as a continuum of the least severe to the most severe and long-lasting experiences with firearms involvement, they do not reflect the impact or fear created by these. In some of the ongoing abuse, for example, the women claimed to have become accustomed to loaded firearms being improperly stored in their home or even casually left by the back door or bed. Other women who were not directly threatened with firearms, but whose partners owned or had easy access to them, were terrified.

### Study Limitations and Implications

Limitations to this study include that it focused only on women who had sought assistance either from shelters or from the police. The interviews were conducted in a short time frame of four months, and yet, with the assistance of the service providers, it was relatively easy to find 40 women who were willing to tell their stories. Nevertheless, relying on information from women who use formal agencies cannot provide a comprehensive estimate of the extent to which firearms are involved. The current study was not intended to establish the incidence of firearms involvement, and it is important to under-score that it cannot do so. Further, the experiences of women who have not sought assistance for abuse involving firearms from formal agencies may be different from the experiences of women who have.

It is important to recognize that in all cases the firearms were used or threatened in the context of an already-abusive intimate relationship. This is not a study about firearms ownership, but about the risk of firearms being used or threatened when men were already controlling and abusing their partners. Forensic and clinical social workers, shelter staff and the police and other members of the criminal justice system need a clearer understanding of this if they are to adequately protect the women who seek their assistance.

Any of the women interviewed for this study could have been fatally shot by their partners. Their children and the partners, themselves, were at similar risk. We know little about what distinguishes these situations from



those in which women were shot and killed by partners. However, the risk to all family members when firearms are available in the context of an abusive intimate relationship should be clear (Bangalore & Messerli, 2013).

From a practice perspective, the justice and shelter system's response to women's fears of their abusive partner's access to firearms must err on the side of safety by explicitly assessing for several dynamics. Forensic social workers, shelter staff and other counsellors and advocates for abused women should enquire directly about firearms in the home and whether these are involved in the abuse in any way. In parallel interviews with service providers about firearm threats (Tutty, 1999), several recommended asking women specifically about firearms, rather than asking about weapons in general or not asking at all. Similarly, that 42.5% of the male partners in the current study threatened suicide reinforces the need to explicitly ask about this dynamic as well (Dawson, 2005). A final query is with respect to whether the partners made credible threats to murder their spouses either by their words or actions.

Organizations that use lethality assessments such as the Danger Assessment (Campbell, Webster, & Glass, 2009), which include questions about firearms and suicide threats from the partner, have a simple way to introduce what some see as sensitive issues. These are critical to assess if one is to assist women in creating safety plans that protect them and their children. Once firearms are identified in abusive relationships, to address safety, the clinician and woman should discuss risks and possible options in detail. For example, provisions to seize firearms when family members are threatened are available to police officers (Frattaroli & Vernick, 2006), and were generally supported in an American study by Sorenson (2006). Nonetheless, women may be reluctant to do anything to deprive partners of their firearms, especially if they could be identified as the cause of these actions, as many in the current study described their partner's attachment to their guns. Women often have the best sense of their safety and should take the lead in deciding to report firearms use or threats to the police or to obtain a restraining order.

From a policy perspective, McPhedran and Mauser's analysis of whether increased 1995 changes to Canadian firearms legislation such as increased attention to firearms registration and provisions to check whether firearms ownership applicants had a history of IPV incidents (2013) concluded that these provisions did not impact femicide rates. Vigdor and Mercy's 2006 study in the United States concluded that restrictions on firearms for persons with restraining orders against them, reduced intimate partner homicides by about 7%. However neither study examined the effects on non-lethal incidents. A recent qualitative study in California with 17 women whose partners had firearms removed within 24 hr of a restraining order being implemented both endorsed the policy and felt safer, supporting this procedure in instances more similar to women in the current study (Vittes, Webster, Frattaroli, Claire, & Wintemute, 2013).

In conclusion, for police and forensic social workers, counsellors/advocates, educating women about the serious nature of firearm accessibility in an already-abusive relationship, the rights of individuals, and strategies to protect themselves, including notifying the police about firearms, has the potential to save lives. Given the previously identified gaps in adequately preparing social work professionals on the nature of and how to intervene with women whose partners abuse them (Black et al., 2010; McMahon et al., 2013), the current study adds important additional context about not only how firearm threats affect women victims, but women's views of men's threats and the danger to themselves and their children.

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