

# Economic Abuse and Intra-household Inequities in Food Security

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## ABSTRACT

Food insecurity affected over 2.3 million Canadians in 2004. To date, the food security literature has not considered the potential impact of economic abuse on food security, but there are three ways in which these two important public health issues may be related: 1) victims of economic abuse are at risk of food insecurity when they are denied access to adequate financial resources; 2) the conditions that give rise to food insecurity may also precipitate intimate partner violence in all its forms; 3) women who leave economically abusive intimate heterosexual relationships are more likely to live in poverty and thus are at risk of food insecurity. This paper presents a case of one woman who, during a qualitative research interview, spontaneously reported economic abuse and heterosexual interpersonal violence. The economic abuse suffered by this participant appears to have affected her food security and that of her children, while her husband's was apparently unaffected. There is an urgent need to better understand the nature of intra-household food distribution in food-insecure households and the impact of economic abuse on its victims' food security. Such an understanding may lead to improved food security measurement tools and social policies to reduce food insecurity.

**MeSH Terms:** Domestic violence; family; public health; poverty

## RÉSUMÉ

Plus de 2,3 millions de Canadiens ont souffert d'insécurité alimentaire en 2004. Jusqu'à maintenant, les études sur l'insécurité alimentaire n'ont pas tenu compte de l'impact possible de l'exploitation financière, mais ces deux importants enjeux de santé publique pourraient être liés de trois façons différentes : 1) les victimes d'exploitation financière sont vulnérables à l'insécurité alimentaire lorsqu'on leur refuse l'accès à des ressources financières suffisantes; 2) les conditions propices à l'insécurité alimentaire peuvent aussi précipiter la violence entre partenaires intimes, sous toutes ses formes; 3) les femmes qui mettent fin à une relation intime hétérosexuelle où elles sont exploitées financièrement sont plus susceptibles de vivre sous le seuil de la pauvreté, et elles sont donc vulnérables à l'insécurité alimentaire. Nous présentons ici le cas d'une femme qui, pendant une entrevue de recherche qualitative, a spontanément révélé qu'elle était victime d'exploitation financière et de violence interpersonnelle hétérosexuelle. L'exploitation financière dont elle a souffert semble avoir mis en péril sa sécurité alimentaire et celle de ses enfants, tandis que la sécurité alimentaire de son mari n'aurait pas été touchée. Il est urgent de mieux comprendre la répartition des vivres au sein des ménages souffrant d'insécurité alimentaire et l'impact de l'exploitation financière sur la sécurité alimentaire des personnes qui en sont victimes. On pourrait peut-être ainsi améliorer les outils de mesure de la sécurité alimentaire et les politiques sociales visant à réduire l'insécurité alimentaire.

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Food insecurity refers to individuals' and households' limited, inadequate, or insecure access to sufficient, safe, nutritious, and personally acceptable food to meet dietary requirements for a healthy and productive life.<sup>1</sup> It is a managed process, increasing in severity from a) worry about having enough food, to b) decreased quality of food, and c) decreased quantity of food, including outright hunger. In Canada, food insecurity is primarily a result of poverty.<sup>2,3</sup> It has significant social and psychological consequences, including feelings of deprivation and social exclusion,<sup>4</sup> and is an important public health issue and social problem.<sup>1,3,5</sup> In 2004, over 2.3 million Canadians reported that they were food insecure in the previous year.<sup>6</sup>

Currently, food insecurity is measured at the level of the household,<sup>1</sup> though the literature shows that individuals in the same household do not have the same experience of food insecurity. To date, research has focussed on the experiences of mothers and children, and has established that mothers use a variety of strategies, including going hungry themselves, to prevent their children from going hungry.<sup>4,7-26</sup> However, much less is known about the intra-household distribution of food resources in other configurations of household members. Research from the 1980s showed that women in lower-income, dual-parent (heterosexual) households, who did most of the household food work, catered to men's food preferences, and that men's food preferences often took precedence over those of other family members and the household budget.<sup>14,15</sup>

In this paper, I consider the case of a participant in a larger study on single mothers living in poverty,<sup>27</sup> who, during a qualitative research interview, spontaneously reported the impact of economic abuse on her food purchasing ability. I consider this case in relation to the literature on intimate partner violence and link it to the literature on food insecurity. Food has long been acknowledged as a catalyst for physical and psychological violence against women in abusive heterosexual relationships. In such relationships, a woman's perceived failure to carry out what her partner considers her "proper" duties can act as a trigger for violence.<sup>28,29</sup> In the literature on heterosexual intimate partner violence, there are reports of men

denying their partners the resources to buy food, including dramatic cases of women being starved.<sup>28-32</sup> However, to date, the potential of economic abuse to negatively impact food security has not been considered in the food security literature. This paper reports on a specific case of economic abuse in a heterosexual relationship; however, economic abuse in other familial or caregiving relationships, such as between adult children and their older parents, could also affect the food security status of the victims.

As Sev'er<sup>31</sup> describes, financial or economic abuse:

*“occurs when the abused person (most likely the woman) is denied access to the family’s money and is not allowed any power over how money is spent. It also involves monitoring what, where, how much, and when she can spend money.”*  
(p. 18)

In the 1999 *General Social Survey (GSS)*, 4% of women who were or had been in an intimate relationship reported that in the previous 5 years, they had had partners who prevented them from knowing about or having access to the family income, even if they asked.<sup>33</sup> Stress over finances is commonly reported to precipitate violence against women,<sup>34,35</sup> and chronic male unemployment and low socio-economic status are significant predictors of abuse (though violence against women occurs in all socio-economic groups).<sup>33,34,36,37</sup>

Economic violence in intimate relationships and food insecurity may be related in three separate ways: 1) denied access to adequate financial resources, those in economically abusive relationships, as well as any children living in the household, are at risk of food insecurity; 2) the conditions that give rise to food insecurity may also precipitate violence in all its forms; 3) women who leave abusive relationships may have to rely on social assistance or low-wage employment, which puts them and their children in poverty and thus at risk of food insecurity.

### Case report

In a qualitative research study concerning the experiences of single mothers living on social assistance,<sup>27</sup> 2 of 15 participants spontaneously reported significant violence in previous long-term heterosexual relationships. In one case, this violence was

primarily emotional. In the other case, the participant Donna (a pseudonym), a mother of three, discussed at length the physical, sexual, emotional and economic abuse she endured at the hands of her ex-husband, who was a member of the Canadian Navy. After her husband left the marriage, six years prior to the interviews, Donna was held responsible for his debts, had to declare bankruptcy, and went on social assistance.

While they were married, Donna’s ex-husband attempted to control her life and keep her financially dependent on him. He would not allow her to have paid employment, though at times, to make extra money, Donna did provide childcare in their home while he was at work. Donna’s ex-husband did not provide her with adequate funds to run the household, and she was forced to account to him for every penny she spent.

*“With my husband, the way it was, I could never tell you what he made in a year; because he’d put four hundred dollars a month in the bank, out of that four hundred dollars (...) I had to stretch it throughout the month and pay out six hundred, so I really couldn’t do it.”*

Donna described a number of budgetary and food strategies to cope with the shortfall: for example, she bought in bulk; used coupons; did comparison shopping; altered recipes to “stretch” the meal; prepared food from scratch; never ate out; and served herself and her children meals of lesser quality and quantity. She never bought herself new clothing, and did not participate in the recreational activities that her friends on the military base enjoyed, because she could not afford it. When she and her children were out with other mothers and their children, the other women would pay for treats at the store for Donna’s children, knowing that Donna could not afford them.

When he was not at sea, Donna’s ex-husband would usually specify, before he left for work in the morning, the content of the meal he wanted that evening. He would explode in anger if the meal was not exactly what he requested; for example, if Donna tried to substitute a less expensive cut of meat, or if the meal was not cooked exactly as he thought it should be. In the later years of their marriage, Donna and

her children would eat their dinner before her ex-husband returned home, a strategy she developed to prevent the children from witnessing the abuse that often accompanied his meal. She, and sometimes her children, would eat a different meal, which saved money because it incorporated less expensive, lesser quality food than her husband ate. According to Donna’s account, the husband in this family did not appear to suffer the effects of food insecurity related to the inadequate finances for household expenses, but she, and to a lesser extent, her children, did.

## DISCUSSION

Heterosexual intimate partner violence against women is a significant public health issue<sup>38-41</sup> that may coincide with, or, when taking the form of economic abuse, cause food insecurity. Currently, we know little about the prevalence of food insecurity that is caused by economic abuse.

The single case of economic abuse reported in this manuscript shares features of other cases reported in the literature.<sup>28,30-32</sup> Though Donna’s food security status was not formally measured, her ability to feed herself and her children had been highly constrained by her lack of financial resources due to economic abuse. She worried about how to feed her family and had developed an impressive array of budgetary and food shopping and preparation skills to cope. Despite these skills, she, and sometimes her children, ate food of lesser quality than her husband, and she restricted her own portion sizes. Donna’s case, in which food insecurity was caused by economic abuse and existed along with physical, psychological, and sexual abuse (and the sequelae of this violence), exemplifies the observation of Vozoris and Tarasuk<sup>42</sup> that food insecurity “is one dimension of a more pervasive vulnerability to a range of physical, mental and social health problems among households struggling with economic constraints” (p. 120).

This case suggests a previously unrecognized way in which food security status may vary within households, and adds urgency to the need to understand the nature of intra-household food distribution in food-insecure households beyond mothers and their children. A better understanding of intra-household food distribu-

tion in food-insecure households and the effects of economic abuse on intra-household food security may have important implications for the measurement of food insecurity, as well as for social policies to reduce food insecurity and improve the lives of those affected.

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