"Where Have All the Women Gone[1]?"

Woman Abuse and Canadian Social Policy

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Abstract

Being abused by an intimate partner is a disturbing reality for many Canadian women. While woman abuse was once deemed a serious social problem, policymakers are increasingly conceptualizing the problem from a degendered perspective, with men seen as equally likely to be victims and the family targeted as the major focus for intervention. Policymakers have also recently turned their attention to children exposed to woman abuse, often with detrimental effects to abused mothers. This discussion paper highlights three characteristics of adopting a degendered and family/child-centred approach in government policymaking with respect to intimate partner violence against women: 1. The portrayal of men as equally victimized by intimate partner violence is, in part, a consequence of research that fails to take into account the context of the abuse and ignores the asymmetrical power imbalance between women and men in families. 2. Utilizing degendered terms (e.g., family violence and domestic abuse) for policies and programs, obscures the fact that women tend to be overwhelmingly the primary victims. 3. Recent attention to children's exposure to violence in the home has overshadowed women's victimization. We argue that policymakers should adopt a gendered analysis when developing solutions to address intimate partner violence, and that the focus on the potential impacts on children witnessing the abuse of their mothers not be used to the detriment of women's interests and well-being. Social policy must protect children as well as their mothers.

Résumé

Le fait d'être abusée par un partenaire intime est une réalité perturbante pour beaucoup de femmes canadiennes. Alors que la violence contre les femmes était autrefois perçue comme un problème social grave, les responsables des orientations politiques conceptualisent de plus en plus le problème dans une perspective qui fait abstraction des genres; les hommes sont perçus comme également à risque d'être victimes et la famille est ciblée comme l'essentiel de l'intervention. Les responsables de l'orientation des politiques se sont aussi préoccupés récemment des enfants exposés à la violence des femmes souvent au détriment des mères abusées. Ce document de travail met en relief trois caractéristiques de l'adoption d'une méthode qui fait abstraction des genres et qui est centrée sur les enfants pour l'élaboration des politiques du gouvernement à l'égard de la violence des partenaires intimes contre les femmes : 1. La description des hommes, comme étant également victimes de la violence des partenaires intimes, est en partie la conséquence d'une recherche qui ne tient pas compte du contexte de la violence et ignore le déséquilibre du pouvoir asymétrique dans les familles entre les femmes et les hommes. 2. L'utilisation de termes qui font abstraction des genres (par ex. : la violence familiale et au foyer) pour les politiques et les programmes a obscurci le fait que les femmes tendent à être les victimes principales à une majorité écrasante. 3. L'attention récente portée à l'exposition des enfants à la violence chez eux a éclipsé la victimisation des femmes. Nous soutenons que les responsables de l'orientation des politiques devraient adopter une analyse qui tient compte des genres quand ils élaborent des solutions traitant de la violence contre un partenaire intime. Nous soutenons aussi que les répercussions potentielles sur les enfants qui ont été témoins de violence contre leur mère ne devraient pas être utilisées au détriment des femmes et de leur bien-être. La politique sociale doit tout aussi bien protéger les mères que les enfants.

Introduction

Violence against women was first identified in Canada as a serious social problem in the early 1970s, when it was mostly described as *wife battering* (MacLeod, 1980). Since the 1970s, feminists and other women's advocates have looked broadly at violence against women, raising concerns about its many forms beyond intimate partner violence such as sexual assault, sexual harassment, prostitution and pornography. In addition to naming the problem, activists proposed a gender-based theoretical model that considers gender and power to be at the core of understanding these different forms of violence. This model has been instrumental in bringing both government and public attention to the issue resulting in significant housing, social services and legal reforms (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Macleod, 1987; Bograd, 1990).

Yet gender-based theoretical explanations of violence against women, especially with respect to intimate partner violence, have been much debated and resisted. In the last decade, a flood of studies has challenged feminist claims that women are the primary victims of intimate partner violence (Lupri & Grandin, 2004; Migliaccio, 2001). More importantly, data seems to suggest that a feminist, gender-based approach is not useful in understanding intimate partner violence because "women do it too".

Whether these studies speak to an anti-feminist backlash or are well-meaning but ill-informed counter-balancing attempts to acknowledge that some men may be victimized by some women, we argue that they have seriously damaged the feminist perspective and have undermined women's safety in violent intimate relations. We understand that the gender debate is decades old and acknowledge the many provocative and persuasive arguments of previous feminist scholars (Bograd, 1990; Currie, 1998; DeKeseredy & MacLean, 1998; Jiwani, 2000; Yllö, 1990). Perhaps, some believe now that the debate has been settled and that violence is indeed gender-neutral. As such, we briefly reiterate what others have said about the gendered nature of violence against women, but, more importantly, describe recent trends to de-gender the concept of intimate partner violence and the impact it had on social policy in Canada.

In this paper, we argue that the current Canadian policy discourse on intimate partner violence is problematic on three major grounds. 1. Men are portrayed as equal victims of partner abuse, in part, because of research that does not provide adequate background content or context. 2. Governments continue to conceptualize woman abuse in degendered ways (often reflected in terms, such as family and domestic violence), obscuring the fact that women are the primary victims. 3. Governments have focused their attention on the potential impact of children's exposure to intimate partner violence to the detriment of women victims. This degendered, family/child-centred approach to policy has serious repercussions for women.

As social work educators in the area of violence against women, we are concerned that a new generation of young scholars (and future policymakers) seems generally unaware of the debate, accepting that men and women are equally victimized and that children may be the "real" (more deserving or legitimate) victims when intimate partner violence is identified in families.

The focus of the paper is specifically on the social policy agenda in Alberta for both practical and theoretical reasons. While both authors have considerable research experience across Canada, our most current focus has been woman abuse and social policy in Alberta. On a theoretical level, Alberta may be especially illuminating because of the high rate of violence against women in the province[2]. While Alberta is characterized by particular economic and political factors that make it somewhat unusual among Canadian provinces, it shares a number of

commonalities with them in terms of social policy and woman abuse, making the arguments in this paper relevant and useful for consideration across the country.

The Importance of Problem Representation within Policy

Before we move to a discussion of woman abuse in social policy, it is important to discuss how social concerns are represented in the policy context. Unsurprisingly, policies are formulated to address perceived problems. Therefore, how policymakers perceive a social problem will determine the preferred solution. Borrowing from social constructionist theory, Bacchi (1999) asserts that the representation of a particular social issue determines the agenda for a particular course of action, suggesting that, "every policy proposal contains within it an explicit or implicit diagnosis of the 'problem' ... its problem representation" (p. 1, original emphasis). Problem representations include important assumptions about the nature of the problem, including its cause and assumptions about the actors involved. Therefore, social policy analysis must include the identification and assessment of problem representations.

Today, researchers use different terms to describe violence against women in intimate relationships, including *domestic violence*, *intimate partner violence* and *woman abuse*, the latter phrasing drawing an interesting parallel between the abuse of children and adult women (Tutty, 2009). Some, like Canada's General Social Survey (Statistics Canada, 2005) that looks at both male and female perpetrated acts of violence, focus on assaults that fall under the *Criminal Code of Canada*.

Other researchers broaden their definition to include emotional abuse or coercion, since these often form the core of the abuse dynamics, keeping victims from leaving the relationship and eroding their self-efficacy. The central issue is control or jealousy, the intentional and instrumental use of power to control the woman's actions (Jiwani, 2000; Kimmel, 2002). Stark's term, *coercive control*, (2007) is even more appropriate. While the justice system has become increasingly responsive to criminal assault limited to physical abuse, other social services such as shelters, mental health agencies and family services often include psychological and other non-physical abuse in their terms of reference (Tutty, 2009). We use *woman abuse* in our analysis because it includes all forms of violence that women experience, including physical, sexual, emotional, and financial abuse; rather than narrowing the violent acts to those that warrant criminal charges.

Violence Against Women in Canada

Violence is a disturbing reality for Canadian women. In 2002, 27,094 sexual assaults were reported to police in Canada, with women representing the vast majority of victims (82%) (Kong, Johnson, Beattie, & Cardillo, 2003). Abuse by an intimate

partner is the most common form of violence that Canadian women experience (Cherniak, Grant, Mason, Moore, & Pellizzari, 2005; Johnson, 2006; Statistics Canada, 2005a). Cherniak et al. (2005) remind us that this is in stark contrast to men who are more likely to be assaulted by strangers or acquaintances than by a female intimate partner. According to spousal assaults reported to Canadian police services in 2006, about 8 in 10 victims were women (Statistics Canada, 2008).

A cursory look at Canada's latest national research on partner violence would suggest that men and women are equally victimized. In Canada's 2004 General Social Survey (Statistics Canada, 2005a), women and men self-reported similar rates of victimization by partners (7% for women; 6% for men). However, careful reading and a more in-depth analysis shows that women experience more serious, injurious, and repeated violence than men. Women were more likely to be beaten, choked, or threatened or having a gun or knife used against them (23% versus 15% of male victims). Women were also twice as likely as men to report being victims of repeated violent episodes (21% versus 11%), more than twice as likely to suffer an injury (44% versus 18%), and more likely to fear for their lives because of the violence (34% versus 10%) (Statistics Canada, 2005a). Additionally, the number of women murdered by male partners in Canada from 1974–2000 outnumbered men victims by more than three to one (Dauvergne, 2002). More recently, in 2006, the rate of women being murdered by spouses was 2.6 times the rate for male victims (Li, 2007). This evidence compels us to examine the issue of violence against women from a gendered perspective.

Do Men and Women Perpetrate Violence Equally? — The Gender Debate

It is our position that research that decontextualizes (and degenders) violence against women partners, and fails to adequately incorporate gender and power, provides an inaccurate portrayal of violence within intimate partner relationships. We know that women can and do engage in violent acts against their intimate partners. Importantly, feminist theorists have not denied that women are capable of committing violent acts or that men and boys can be victims. In fact, some suggest that violence by women is a concern that warrants attention (Loseke & Kurz, 2005). Nonetheless, we argue that if policy solutions are to be found discussions on intimate partner violence should occur within a theoretical framework that locates experiences of violence in the gendered context of women's and men's lives.

The position that women experience the most serious abuse in intimate relationships has recently been eclipsed by numerous studies seeming to support the premise that women and men are equally victimized by intimate partners. Over 160 studies on relationship violence conclude that men and women intimate partners commit almost equal rates of violence, with women initiating slightly higher

rates of violence than men in some studies (Archer, 2000; Dutton & Nicholls, 2005; Kimmel, 2002, Straus, 2005).

Researchers and men's rights activists have interpreted the symmetrical prevalence rates to mean that, violence in intimate relationships is primarily *mutual combat* and should, therefore, be considered gender-neutral. They argue that current legal and social policies that support woman abuse are based on erroneous information about the causes and consequences of intimate partner violence, and do little to serve the needs of the much larger majority of men, women, and children who experience the frequent problem of *family violence* (Dutton & Nicholls, 2005). Not surprisingly, proponents of the gender symmetry approach have been vocal advocates for equal policies and services for female and male victims (Dutton & Nicholls, 2005).

Feminist researchers reject these claims arguing that violence occurring within intimate partner relationships is indeed gendered (Nixon, 2007). They purport that, as a group, men occupy more positions of privilege than women. Further, social institutions, such as marriage and the family have promoted and maintained men's violence against women (Bograd, 1990). Most women and men do not equitably exercise power (e.g., participate equally in decision-making) in marriages and families. Historically, men have used violence to exercise their control and power over women partners (Dobash & Dobash, 1990). Often the violence that women experience within the home is related to their lower economic status within the family and their larger burden of care-giving responsibilities (Loseke & Kurz, 2005). All of this suggests that intimate partner violence perpetrated by men must be understood differently than violence perpetrated by women.

Researchers also note that critical factors such as context, meaning, and consequences must be examined before claiming gender symmetry (Dasgupta, 1999; DeKeseredy & Dragiewicz, 2009; DeKeseredy & MacLeod, 1997; Dobash, Dobash, Cavanagh, & Lewis, 1998; Hamberger & Guse, 2002; Johnson, 1995; Saunders, 1990; 2002). Simply counting the number of violent acts (i.e., hit for hit), a common strategy in family conflict research utilizing measures such as Straus' Conflict Tactics Scales (1979), fails to consider such important contexts as each partner's motives, what is achieved by using violence, the meaning of violent acts, and the physical (such as injury) and psychological (such as fear) consequences for each partner.

Dasgupta (1999) and Hamberger and Guse (2002) argue that the primary motivation in men's violence is to inflict pain and injury as a means to control or dominate their female partner. Further, they see men's use of violence not as a discrete set of isolated violent events, but constituting an ongoing pattern of domination, control and fear.

When women use violence it is not typically to inflict pain or injury or to control or dominate their spouse. Instead, women's use of violence is primarily

in self-defense or to retaliate for previous violence perpetrated against them (Hamberger, 1997). Women who aggress against their partner are often the primary victims engaging in active resistance and not abusers who wish to exert fear and control (Hamberger & Guse, 2002). More importantly, even women who use violence and at times even initiate it, usually do not control the overall dynamics of the relationship in the ways that men do (Dobash & Dobash, 1990).

Researchers have suggested that, not only do women and men experience different rates of violence, they also experience the *effects* of violence differently (Dasgupta, 1999; Hamberger & Guse, 2002; Johnson, 2006; Saunders, 1990). As mentioned earlier, women are significantly more likely to sustain severe physical and psychological injuries and/or require medical attention than men (Johnson, 2006; Statistics Canada, 2005a).

Further, abused women report much higher levels of fear than men (Hamberger & Guse, 2002). When men use violence against their female partners, they are usually successful in instilling fear and ultimately controlling/changing their partners' behaviour. On the other hand, women's use of force is usually unsuccessful and does not change their partners' behaviour in the ways that the women intended (Dasgupta, 1999; Hamberger & Guse, 2002).

Importantly, the assertion that women are equally as violent as men has been primary based on research conducted with the Conflict Tactic Scales (CTS) (Straus, 1979) that invariably results in similar proportions of men and women self-reporting victimization by an intimate partner, or higher rates of self-reported victimization from men (Dutton & Nicholls, 2005). A revised version of the scale (Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996) that includes additional items on emotional and sexual abusive acts has not changed the overall endorsement rates because the effects and impacts of the violence differ across the sexes.

The CTS consists of reporting whether one's partner has, in response to marital conflict, enacted any of a list of potential acts from "discussed the issue calmly" (Reasoning Subscale), to "threatened to hit or throw something at him/her" (Verbal Aggression Subscale), to "slapped him/her" (Minor Violence Subscale), to "choked him/her" (Serious Violent Subscale). While only a small proportion of either sex typically use serious violent acts, men and women consistently disclose about equally that their partners have used such actions against them in the past six months. These results are not in contention. The arguments about the use of the CTS scale are with respect to whether to interpret the data as representing "abuse" without adding additional measures that provide information about the context (intentional or accidental) or the effects of the violence (injuries, fear).

It is when one makes such contextual inquiries that the "equal" rates take on new meaning. As mentioned previously, the latest national Canadian study on IPV, the 2004 General Social Survey on Victimization (Statistics Canada, 2005) found almost equal rates of violence when only looking at the CTS-like questions.

It was the additional items about context that suggested significant gender differences with respect to the effects of the acts. Similarly, the U.S. National Violence Against Women Survey (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000) used a modified CTS, gathering additional information about the consequences of the victimization. The study concluded that, "women were significantly more likely than men to report being victimized by a current or former marital/opposite-sex cohabiting partner" (p. 150).

Kimmel (2002) explains why studies using CTS-derived items overestimate the extent of male victimization, seeing that the CTS questions are couched in a framework of dealing with marital conflict. As such, the violence is seen as in response to an argument, an *expressive* or *reactive* reaction, such as heated responses. In contrast, violence can be "instrumental"; defined as intentional, goal-oriented, and used to control and, while these can occur during marital spats, they are also used in other contexts (Kimmel, 2002; Cornell et al., 1996).

Kimmel (2002) likened these two types of violence to Johnson's (1995) distinction between common couple violence (expressive or reactive violence that occurs relatively commonly and involves less severe acts of violence such as pushing and shoving) and Johnson's terms "patriarchal terrorism," which includes not only control through physical violence but "economic subordination, threats, isolation, and other control tactics" (p. 284). Instrumental violence need not occur often. A beating that occurred several years ago need only be threatened again to control the behaviour of one's partner. The gender symmetrical results of the CTS studies are also in sharp contrast to research using other measures that conceptualize intimate partner violence more broadly to include sexual violence and other forms of power and coercion (Warthe & Tutty, 2007).

In summary, it is important to understand the arguments about how using scales that focus on violent acts without inquiring further about the intent and impact of these acts and others leads to equal-gender self-reported victimization rates that do not reflect the observations of front-line workers. Across studies, about eight times more cases of woman abuse come to the attention of authorities than the opposite. For example, Canadian police statistics note that 84% of reported spousal abuse cases involve women victims, while 16% of cases involve men (Ogrodnik, 2007). Similar patterns of differences in the abusive behaviours of men and women were found in Melton and Belknap's (2003) study of a large sample of domestic violence cases in the U.S.

Degendering Woman Abuse within Social Policy Discourse

Despite the national statistics on the prevalence of woman abuse and the important contextual differences between men's and women's use of partner violence, the problem has largely been degendered by Canadian policymakers. This is

particularly evident in Canadian government policy discourse, where gender-specific terms, such as *wife assault*, *violence against women*, and *woman abuse* have not commonly been used. Instead, over the last two decades governments have chosen apolitical, degendered conceptualizations such as *family violence*, *spousal assault*, and *domestic abuse* when referring to intimate partner violence. While several provinces and the federal government use the gendered term *violence against women* in some initiatives, a degendered focus on *family violence* dominates government policy discourse.

Consider the example of the Government of Alberta, which has referred to family violence in every major report released on violence, including: A Coherent and Principled Response to *Family Violence* [italics added] in Alberta: Recommendations for Action and Change (Hurlburt & White, 2003); Alberta Roundtable on *Family Violence* and Bullying: Finding Solutions Together (Government of Alberta, 2004a); and *Family Violence* [italics added]: It's Your Business. Community Resource Guide (Government of Alberta, 2005b, emphasis added), to name only a few.

The preference for a degendered conceptualization of intimate partner violence is also obvious in the content of these reports. For example, in Alberta's Roundtable on *Family Violence* and Bullying (2004a), the authors make no specific reference to women victims of intimate partner violence. In fact, the word *women* is included only five times in the 30-page report! Indeed, the victims of violence have been completely degendered.

Similarly, the report's first "important message" is that, "While many people might think primarily of women and children as the victims of family violence, in fact, family violence affects everyone regardless of gender ..." (p. 8). While it is true that some men are victims of violence from their intimate partners, this statement suggests that the problem is a gender-neutral one and that men and women experience violence equally and in similar ways.

Other examples include the naming of provincial government institutions in Alberta, including the Office for the Prevention of *Family Violence* and the Interdepartmental Committee on *Family Violence* — two structures responsible for setting the government agenda on violence against women in the province. The emphasis on family violence is also evident in major provincial government initiatives such as the Alberta government's World Conference on the Prevention of *Family Violence* in 2005 and its provincial Roundtable on *Family Violence* and Bullying in 2004. The province has also proclaimed November as *Family Violence* Month (Government of Alberta, 1998). Alberta is not alone in its family violence approach. Five other provinces (Manitoba, New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island) have made similar proclamations of "family violence awareness months".

Additionally, Alberta, along with four other provinces[3] (Manitoba, Nova

Scotia, Prince Edward Island, and Saskatchewan) and the Yukon Territory have all passed *family violence* legislation (Office for the Prevention of Family Violence, 1999). Although such legislation is gender-neutral on its face, it is likely that overwhelmingly majority of claimants are women intimate partners. Indeed this has been the case in both Alberta and Saskatchewan where over 90% of claimants have been women (Koshan & Wiegers, 2007).

The attention to family violence is also readily apparent in government funding priorities. *Family violence* programs and initiatives receive substantially more funding than other forms of violence perpetrated against women, including sexual assault, sexual harassment and sexual exploitation. For example, in the 2006 provincial budget the Alberta Government increased its funding for family violence prevention by $4 million. Sexual assault and other sexual related offences against women were not mentioned in the budget. Although we did not focus our review beyond Alberta, we suspect that other provinces may have similar funding priorities.

Focus on Children as the Primary Victims of Family Violence

Recognizing women as the major victims of relationship violence has been further obscured by policymakers' recent attention to children's exposure to violence within the home. A family violence approach assumes that it is the *family* or its members, primarily children, that need to be protected, not women in particular. The plight of children exposed to intimate partner violence has certainly been emphasized in government policy discourse. Consider the review of a recent Government of Alberta document, entitled "Taking Action on Family Violence" (2004b). This document, which outlines the government's action plan to eliminate family violence, includes 41 pictures of children, four pictures of men and children, and two pictures of women and children. Not one picture of a childless woman was included in this major public document on interpersonal violence!

Government attention to children's exposure to intimate partner violence is further evident in recent policy attempts to address the issue. To date, seven Canadian provinces and one territory deem children to be maltreated if they are exposed to violence in the home, warranting child protection intervention: Alberta, Saskatchewan, Québec, Prince Edward Island, Newfoundland, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Northwest Territories (Nixon, 2009a; Nixon, Tutty, Weaver-Dunlop, & Walsh, 2007). Governments' focus on children's victimization related to violence against their mothers has resulted in enormous increases in referrals to child welfare authorities (Trocmé et al., 2005). The new policy change allows child protection workers to intervene when violence in the home is identified, including removing children from the abused parent, typically the mother (Nixon et al., 2007).

Such policies have the unintended consequence of shifting the focus from women/mothers to the impact of the abuse on the children. Abused women are no longer viewed as the primary victims, but in fact are often viewed as quasi-perpetrators of the violence that their children are exposed to. Consequently, abused mothers are held accountable for their children's well-being because they failed to protect their children from witnessing their own victimization (Nixon, 2009b). Instead of focusing on offender perpetration, child protection authorities tend to concentrate their efforts on abused women, who they have conceptualized as inadequate mothers (Nixon, 2002; Strega, 2005).

These child-centred policy changes can have the effect of negating or de-prioritizing women's needs, especially in terms of their physical safety. Child protection workers are spending less time ensuring women's physical safety, than ensuring that they are "good mothers" (Nixon, 2009b). Further, because child exposure to intimate partner violence is considered to be a form of child maltreatment in many jurisdictions, police and shelters are now mandated to contact child welfare authorities if mothers disclose abuse by their intimate partners (Nixon et al., 2007). Scholars are concerned that women will be reluctant to contact the police or seek shelter if they believe that their children will be removed from their care (Nixon, 2009b; Tutty, 2006). In Nixon's study, seven of 13 women involved with child protective services because of violence, claimed that they would not re-contact the police or shelters in the future for fear of their children's apprehension. Similarly, in Tutty's (2006) study of 337 residents in ten YWCA shelters for abused women across Canada, 40 women delayed going to shelter for this reason.

Let it be clear that we are not suggesting that children should not be viewed as legitimate or worthy victims; in fact, society's acknowledgement of the potential impact to children who are exposed to violence against their mothers is an important step forward in the area of woman abuse and children. Further, there is significant overlap between children's exposure to violence in the family and child abuse. For example, Edleson (2001) estimates that in 30 to 60% of families in which either intimate partner violence or child maltreatment is identified, it is likely that both forms of abuse exist. Therefore, it is critical that we give attention to children's exposure - but not to the detrimental of abused mothers. Moreover, we must acknowledge that, while exposure to violence is generally not good for children's well-being, many children show few signs of emotional or developmental harm, suggesting significant variability among children's responses (Edleson, 2004). Therefore, our attention to children's *potential* victimization should not detract our attention from women's *actual* victimization and how we conceptualize the problem of intimate partner violence. Within the context of child protection policy, of course children's needs must be given the proper attention, but policy-makers must also consider the well-being and safety needs of mothers. Good

protection of children can only be met with good protection of their mothers (Sullivan & Bybee, 2002). More importantly, the protection of children can best be achieved when the abuse against their mother has ceased.

Focusing on children's victimization may, in part, reflect the deluge of research articles on the negative impact of exposure to domestic violence on children (Jaffe, Wolfe, & Wilson, 1990; Rossman & Ho, 2000). However, it also fits with the shift towards child-centred/focused policy generally. For example, in 1997, the Alberta government formally changed the Department of Family and Social Services to the Ministry of *Children's* Services[4], which assumes primary responsibility for *family violence* issues. Similarly, in 1994, Manitoba created the *Children* and *Youth* Secretariat, and British Columbia formed the Ministry of *Children* and Families in 1996 and Quebec did the same in 1997.

Scholars have noted that Canadian social policy increasingly focuses on children (Jenson, 2004; Lesemann & Nichol, 1994; Wiegers, 2002). This is evident in the proliferation of the words *child* or *children* in the title of Canadian public policies and programs since the 1980s (Jenson, 2004). Lesemann and Nichol (1994) note the change in policy name from *Family* Allowance to the *Child* Tax Benefit as an example. Scholars have prophesized that such child-centred policies will lead to categories of *worthy/deserving* (i.e., children) and *unworthy/undeserving* (i.e., mothers), and may be potentially damaging to certain members of society, most notably women (Wiegers, 2002).

Not surprisingly, the emphasis on children influences how our social policies and programs have been framed, especially in the case of family violence in which children are increasingly being considered the worthy or most deserving victims. Abused women are less apt to be considered worthy or deserving, and, especially from a child protection point of view, are being held responsible or culpable for their children's exposure to violence (Nixon, 2009b). The damaging consequence is that the interests of children are essentially pitted against those of women, with children's interests now taking precedence. The shift to a child-centred philosophy has not only rendered women's victimization invisible but has also reframed women as secondary victims.

The Impact of a Degendered and Child-centred Approach to Intimate Partner Violence Policy

The lack of attention to gender in Canadian social policy is not new. Several academics have noted the absence of gender in social and family policies generally (Evans & Wekerle, 1997) and violence against women specifically (Currie, 1990; DeKeseredy & Dragiewicz, 2009; Koshan & Wiegers, 2007; Levan, 1996). According to Currie (1990) and Levan (1996), the issue of intimate partner violence has slowly been wrested from feminist advocates and grassroots organizations, seriously

impacting how woman assault is now viewed. They view the issue of violence against women as having become depoliticized and as taking on a more medical or treatment orientation and *institutionalized* by governments. This is especially evident in the consideration of intimate partner violence as a mental health issue and the provision of individual treatment and family-based programs. Levan contends that a feminist analysis that considers power and gender as central in understanding the problem has been eroded in the provision of supports and assistance to abuse survivors.

Given the trend towards neo-conservatism over the past two decades, it should not be surprising that, within Canadian policy discourse, gendered analyses of intimate partner violence (i.e., woman abuse) have been eclipsed by degendered ones (i.e., family violence). Luxton (1997) noted that a neo-conservative political ideology has been extremely powerful in shaping current Canadian family policy. No doubt, this has also been the case for the issue of violence against women (see Koshan & Wiegers, 2007). Rankin and Vickers (2001) contend that governments have been ideologically resistant to feminist values and beliefs. Governments' anti-woman or anti-feminist approach may explain, in part, why they have been reluctant to discuss violence against women in gender specific terms, instead opting for degendered terms such as family violence and domestic violence.

Although studies have yet to conclude that degendered conceptualizations of violence have jeopardized services for women victims, such as reduced crisis services for women and the regression of important policies for women, there is anecdotal evidence that suggests this may be a significant possibility. In Canada and the United States, men's rights activists have used a gender-neutral argument of *family violence* to successfully lobby for equal access to services for abused men. During the regional roundtables that culminated in Alberta's Roundtable on Family Violence and Bullying in Calgary in May of 2004, special efforts were made to accommodate the voices of men's rights advocates, with two special discussions on abused men held in Alberta's two major cities (Toneguzzi, 2004). In 1990, Straus and Gelles noted that in the United States, their Conflict Tactic Scale-based research had been utilized in court cases against battered women, and to minimize the need for transition houses for abused women.

DeKeseredy and Schwartz (2003) describe a complaint against a family service agency in Alberta that was taken to the Alberta Human Rights Commission for failing to mention that men could also be abused by women partners in their brochure advertising groups for abused women. The centre could not afford to fight the allegation and withdrew the original brochure, issuing replacements that included the issue of female violence toward men. The fathers' rights organization announced that it would use the legal system again to target other agencies that consider women to be the main targets of intimate partner violence. While no repercussions of this case have yet been documented, it is quite possible that

Alberta service organizations perceive this decision as prohibiting them from publicly adopting a gendered-specific analysis in their program materials and their work.

Government policies and programs aimed to help family violence victims may be ineffective or potentially dangerous for many women experiencing violence of any kind. Portraying relationship violence as symmetrical denies the seriousness of violence against women and may lead to the reduction (and perhaps, elimination) of essential services for abused women. Women will not be viewed as innocent or legitimate victims and, therefore, undeserving of public sympathy. Instead, abused women will be viewed as partially responsible for the violence that they experience, especially given the increased attention from child protection authorities to children's exposure to violence in the home (see Nixon, 2009b).

Without a full understanding of the context of women's use of violence, serious negative consequences can occur, such as the police laying dual charges, increase in arrests and criminal records, women losing custody of their children, women losing immigration status and/or being deported. Perhaps most importantly, women may be reluctant to call the police in future violent situations; contact that may well save their lives and the lives of their children (Loseke & Kurz, 2005).

An emphasis on family violence focuses on the effects on the family institution (e.g., family breakdown, divorce, and the harm done to children who witness violence) and fails to adequately address the effects on women, including the violation of women's basic human rights (Levan, 1996). By locating violence within the family, the real problem of women's oppression, exploitation and inequality is submerged (Levan, 1996); and the solutions that would address these fundamental issues will not be addressed in any meaningful way.

Lastly, family violence approaches, too often, result in individualistic solutions, suggesting that the problem of family violence is rooted in individual and/or family dysfunction. This is particularly evident in the proliferation of programs and policies aimed at assessment, treatment and rehabilitation, and other attempts to *break the cycle of family violence*. As an example, the Alberta government recently allocated approximately $4 million funding to the Alberta Mental Health Board to implement the Provincial Family Violence Treatment Program, suggesting that family violence is a mental health issue. Governments' emphasis on family dysfunction and mental health ignores the systemic and structural factors that contribute to the violence that women experience within intimate relationships. Adopting an individual and/or family treatment model decontextualizes the problem of violence against women and women's oppression overall. Such a view overlooks the importance of patriarchy, misogyny, and women's social and economic inequity.

To conclude, not only has the government focused on violence occurring in families, they also conceptualize this violence as degendered, adopting the

premise promoted by research using Conflict Tactic Scale-like measures that men and women are equally victimized by violence. We are aware that the Canada's *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* may compel policymakers to be gender-neutral in their drafting of social policy in some circumstances; however, this does not preclude them from *analyzing* social problems (e.g., woman abuse) from a gendered lens.

Using degendered conceptualizations of violence against women obscures the fact that women are the central targets and suffer the most profound consequences of intimate partner violence, including physical and psychological injuries. A degendered conceptualization of the problem renders these effects invisible. Consequently, government policies and programs aimed to help family violence victims may be ineffective or potentially dangerous for many women experiencing violence of any kind.

We conclude by reiterating that intimate partner violence against women must be examined within the broader framework of violence and oppression that women experience globally (Price, 2005). The United Nations (UN) has acknowledged the gender-based roots of violence — that the violence experienced by women is not random but happens to women because they are women. As part of the *Declaration for the Elimination of Violence Against Women* (1993), the UN has urged participating countries, including Canada, to develop national plans of action that would provide strategies for the prevention, intervention and treatment of violence against women.

Canadian policy efforts on violence against women, including intimate partner violence, must incorporate issues of gender and power and must conceptualize the problem as stemming beyond individual characteristics. It is the women with whom we work, either as advocates, counsellors, or researchers that remind us repeatedly of the importance of maintaining true to our beliefs. Their stories, ultimately, provide the most compelling arguments against a gender-neutral view of violence in intimate relationships.

Notes

1 The title was adapted from the previous policy research initiative funded by Status of Women Canada, entitled, "Where Have All the Women Gone?: Shifts in Policy Discourses.

2 In the 2004 General Social Survey (GSS) 10% of women in Alberta were victims of spousal assault, making it the highest rate in the country (the national average was 7%) (Statistics Canada, 2005a). Alberta has also experienced one of the highest rates of domestic femicide over the last three decades (Statistics Canada, 2005b).

3 Ontario's *Domestic Violence Protection Act, 2000* received Royal Assent on

December 21, 2001 but as of the date of writing, has not yet been proclaimed into law.

4 Currently, it is named the Ministry of Children and Youth Services.

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