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Children's Exposure to Intimate Partner Violence in Alberta, Canada: The Construction of a Policy Problem

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Children's exposure to violence in the home has been a major issue for policy makers worldwide. The study examines how child protection policy makers in one Canadian province represent the problem of children's exposure. The current policy representation is problematic because it locates the problem within the broader framework of family violence. By doing so, policy makers equate the violence that mothers experience with other forms of violence in the home, and degender the violence that children are exposed to. Such policy representations may not be effective in protecting children and their mothers. These themes and the implications for policy are discussed.

KEYWORDS child exposure to intimate partner violence, intimate partner violence, child protection, child welfare, policy analysis

INTRODUCTION

Since the early 1970s, feminist researchers and advocates worldwide have identified violence against wives or female partners as a serious and pervasive social issue, resulting in substantial changes to housing, social services, and legal reforms. However, it was not until the early 1980s that the potential impact on children was first recognized (Hughes & Barad, 1983). Before then, children typically received attention from child protection authorities

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only if they had been directly physically or sexually assaulted within the home. Today, the issue is regarded as a significant social concern. In their study, Thompson, Saltzman, and Johnson (2003) found that approximately 33% and 40% of abused women in Canada and United States, respectively, reported that their children had witnessed domestic violence. According to the 1996 British Crime Survey, 51% of women who suffered chronic abuse by their partners were living in households with children under the age of 16 years (Mirrlees-Black, 1999).

Since first identified, there has been an explosion of studies on the immediate and long-term impact of children's exposure to violence in the home (see Wolfe, Crooks, Lee, McIntyre-Smith, & Jaffe, 2003). Generally, the research on children's exposure suggests that witnessing violence is damaging to a child's emotional, physical, and social well-being (Hughes & Barad, 1983; Jaffe, Wolfe, & Wilson, 1990; Rossman & Ho, 2000). Some researchers purport that children who are exposed to violence in the home are more at risk of becoming future perpetrators (boys) or future victims (girls) (Jaffe et al., 1990); while other researchers have identified an overlap between witnessing domestic violence and experiencing physical, sexual abuse, and neglect (Edleson, 1999b). Yet more recently, researchers have studied the impact of abuse on parenting, concluding that being abused has a direct and negative impact on the victim's parenting, which in turn endangers their children's well-being (Levendosky & Graham-Berman, 1998).

Despite research being conducted in this area for the past 25 years or more, it is only the past decade or so that systems responsible for the protection of children have regarded exposure to violence as a concern, warranting their involvement. Child protection systems (CPS) around the world are making major policy changes in attempt to protect children from the potential harmful effects of witnessing violence in the home, including amending existing child maltreatment statutes to include exposure and developing specific organizational policies and protocols (see Nixon, Tutty, Weaver-Dunlop, & Walsh, 2007). By considering children's exposure to intimate partner violence as a form of child maltreatment, CPS workers are now intervening when intimate partner violence is identified, including the removal children from the home.

Not surprisingly, there is a heated debate as to whether or not CPS authorities should be intervening in cases of children's exposure to intimate partner violence (Edleson, 2004; Jaffe, Wolfe, & Crooks 2003). Many believe that legislating CPS intervention in cases of exposure may lead to better assessment and intervention for children and families and enhanced coordination among the various agencies involved (Jaffe et al., 2003; Weithorn, 2001). Despite policy makers' good intentions and the potential benefits of legislating child exposure to intimate partner violence as a form of child maltreatment, many researchers and women's advocates have voiced concerns about the negative impacts, especially for abused women and their children.

Some argue that when intimate partner violence cases are brought to the attention of CPS, workers concentrate their efforts on battered women as an attempt to keep children safe, often revictimizing them in the process (Humphreys, 1999; Magen, 1999; Nixon, 2002; 2009a). As an example, in Nixon's (2002) study of Canadian CPS workers, they viewed the children as their primary client and believed that the best way to protect the children was to focus on the mother's behavior, including her parenting ability and choice of intimate partners. Others have found that CPS workers routinely threaten and warn battered mothers that if they do not alleviate the abusive situation, their children will be apprehended (Farmer & Owen, 1995; Humphreys, 1999). Of grave concern is that abused mothers may be reluctant to disclose their abusive situation to helping professionals, notably police and shelter workers, if they believe that their children are at risk of apprehension (Nixon, 2009a; Tutty, 2006).

Recent policy changes regarding children's exposure to intimate partner violence have been implemented with little forethought as to their potential impact on victims, most notably women and their children. In fact, renowned scholars, Jaffe, Wolfe, and Crooks (2003) have called for a moratorium on the development of CPS legislation related to intimate partner violence until more research is conducted to determine the negative effects of these policy changes. Despite Jaffe and colleagues' plea, few studies have examined the impact of CPS policy on abused mothers and their children (Jenney, Alaggia, Mazzuca, & Redmond, 2005; Johnson, 2006; Shim, 2004). Although these studies are useful in that they highlight both the positive and negative impacts of CPS policy, they do not critically examine the policies themselves, including the ideological assumptions and beliefs contained within the policies or how policy makers represent the problems that the policies are meant to address. This represents a profound gap in the current body of literature on CPS policy and intimate partner violence. This article is meant to narrow that gap by examining how the problem of children's exposure to intimate partner violence has been represented within CPS policy and the potential impacts on abused mothers and their children.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PROBLEM REPRESENTATION WITHIN POLICY

Before a discussion of CPS policy relating to children's exposure is presented, it is important to discuss how social concerns are constructed or *represented* within the context of policy. Unsurprisingly, policies are formulated to address perceived problems. Therefore, how policy makers *perceive* a social problem will determine the preferred solution and course of action. 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” (Bacchi, 1999, p. 1, original emphasis). Problem representations include important assumptions about the nature of the problem, including its cause and assumptions about the actors involved. In addition, how problems become represented will influence the kind of policy solution that is chosen. Again, how we perceive or think about something will affect what we think ought to be done about it (Bacchi, 1999). Therefore, social policy analysis must include the identification and assessment of problem *representations*.

METHODOLOGY

The article is based on the findings of the author’s doctoral research (Nixon, 2009b) that explored how child exposure to intimate partner violence is represented as a social problem in Alberta, Canada, and how these representations are reflected in CPS policy. A qualitative case study approach to policy research was adopted (Stake, 1995). Alberta’s CPS policy was chosen for several reasons. First, unlike many other Canadian provinces, Alberta includes children’s exposure within its statutory definition of child maltreatment. Second, Alberta has recently developed province-wide standards to specifically address child exposure. Third, aside from parental neglect, children’s exposure is the most frequent form of substantiated child maltreatment. According to the Alberta Incidence Study on Reported Child Abuse and Neglect (AIS-2003), 17,864 cases of child maltreatment were substantiated in 2003 and of these, slightly less than $\frac{1}{4}$ ($n = 4,112$) involved exposure to intimate partner violence (MacLaurin et al., 2006). Finally, from an important historical perspective, Alberta has had one of the highest rates of violence against female intimate partners in Canada (Statistics Canada, 1993; Statistics Canada, 2005), including female domestic homicide (Statistics Canada, 2005). Although this study focuses on the CPS policy response of one Canadian province, the results will be useful to any jurisdiction that is contemplating developing CPS policies to deal with children’s exposure, especially the consequences of particular policy choices.

Data collection included identifying and reviewing recent government documents (written between 2000 and 2008), including Alberta’s CPS statutes and accompanying regulations, CPS training documents, and government reports on violence in the home. Additionally, government-led initiatives, government websites, media representations of the issue (e.g., government news releases), public addresses, and parliamentary debates were examined. The decision to select only documents that were written in 2000 or later was based on feasibility and the timeline of the Alberta government’s

involvement in intimate partner violence issues, as the bulk of government documents were produced in 2000 or after.

Basic qualitative content analysis procedures (Weber, 1990) and Bacchi's (1999) *What's the Problem?* approach to policy analysis were used to analyze the documents. Bacchi's approach provided a useful model for examining how policy makers represent children's exposure, identifying the presumptions or assumptions underlying this representation, and identifying what is left unproblematic in this representation.

RESULTS

The study results reveal that policy makers in Alberta, Canada, represent the problem of children's exposure to intimate partner violence within the problematic framework of family violence. By subsuming it within the broader auspices of family violence, the violence that occurs within intimate partner relationships is equated with other forms of violence that occur within the family. By doing so, the violence that women experience is degendered, obscuring the differences between men and women with respect to their experiences of violence. The study also reveals that the solutions preferred by policy makers to deal with family violence remain at the individual and family level, and do not focus on changes at the broader, systemic level, such as men's violence and women's social and economic inequality. Moreover, by focusing solely at the individual level, abused women and their parenting ability become the focus of CPS policy. Each theme is briefly discussed.

Representing Children's Exposure to Intimate Partner Violence as Family Violence

The study found that government policy makers in Alberta represent the problem of children's exposure to intimate partner violence within the broader framework of *family violence*:

. . . exposure to *family violence* [italics added] harms children now and in their future. (Government of Alberta, 2007a, para. 1)

Exposure to *family violence* [italics added] has a dramatic effect on children. (Government of Alberta, 2007b, para. 1).

Children exposed to *family violence* [italics added] are more likely to be bullies or be bullied. They are also at greater risk of growing up to be abusive to others, to be abused, or both. (Government of Alberta, 2007b, para. 4)

Policy makers also include children's exposure within their formal definition of family violence:

The abuse of power within relationships of family, trust or dependency that endangers the survival, security or well-being of another person. It can include many forms of abuse including spousal abuse, elder abuse and neglect, child abuse and neglect, parent abuse, and *witnessing abuse of others in the family* [italics added] . . . (Government of Alberta, 2007a, p. 2)

Interestingly, although *spousal abuse* is included in the province's definition, it is not frequently used in the broader government discourse when referring to exposed children. Instead, family violence is used most often, as cited in the above examples. An exception to this is the use of *domestic violence* within CPS policy discourse:

Children of all ages are deeply affected by *domestic violence* [italics added]. (Government of Alberta, 2005a, p. 52)

If a child has been exposed to *domestic violence* [italics added] within the child's family . . . (Government of Alberta, 2007d, p. 7).

Domestic violence is used most prominently in CPS policy discourse likely because it is the term specified in the province's statutory definition of child abuse:

emotional injury is the result of . . . (C) exposure to *domestic violence* [italics added] or severe domestic disharmony. (Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act, R.S.A. 2000, c. C-12.)

Further, a search of gender-specific references to violent intimate relationships (e.g., *wife assault*, *violence against women*, and *woman abuse*) was conducted and revealed that such references are infrequent. Terms such as *violence against women* and *woman abuse* were found in a few government documents, suggesting that policy makers are aware of the gendered nature of violence within intimate partner relationships; however, they are greatly outnumbered by degendered references to violence. It is clear that, regardless of the terms used (domestic or family violence), policy makers represent children's exposure to intimate partner violence as a social phenomenon that occurs within the confines of the family.

Degendering Intimate Partner Violence

The study revealed that Alberta policy makers represent the violence that children are exposed to in degendered ways. This is most evident in the

language chosen by government policy makers. As mentioned earlier, family violence is the preferred way of naming the problem of violence that occurs within intimate relationships, as opposed to more gender-specific labels. Perhaps this is most evident in the titles of the major reports produced by the Alberta government, 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* [italics added] 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 degendering of violence that children are exposed to is also evident in policy makers' references to victims and perpetrators, both of which have been represented in degendered or gender-obscured ways. Consider the following references to victims: *individuals who cannot, or choose not to access women's shelters* (Government of Alberta, 2005c, para. 9); *parents who go to shelters* (Government of Alberta, 2007d, para. 5); *those who have gathered the courage to leave violent relationships* (Government of Alberta, 2006a, para. 4.); and *someone who is struggling with family violence* (Government of Alberta, 2006b, para. 3). Many of these terms appear clumsy and awkward, suggesting that the choices of terminology are both deliberate and purposeful. The perpetrators have also been obscured in the province's representation of family violence, as evidenced by the prominent use of degendered terms, most notably *abusers* and *offenders*, which were found to be used interchangeably throughout government discourse.

References to gender or sex are almost completely absent from government discourse when discussing violence within intimate relationships. As a specific example, the report titled, "Roundtable on Family Violence and Bullying: Finding Solutions Together" (2004a) makes no specific reference to abused women. In fact, the word, *women*, is mentioned only five times in the entire 30-page report on relationship violence. Moreover, the authors state 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* [italics added] . . ." (Government of Alberta, 2004a, p. 8). Further, one specific recommendation of the Roundtable was to, "avoid making family violence strictly a gender issue" (Government of Alberta, 2004b, p. 12).

Government policy makers have also degendered partner violence by presenting statistics in ways that render women's victimization invisible. For example, in 2005, the Minister of Children's Services at that time, Heather Forsythe, stated that, "it is estimated seven per cent of *Canadians* [italics added] 15 years-of-age and older have experienced spousal violence in the previous five years" (Government of Alberta, 2005b, p. i). According to the General Social Survey, to which Ms. Forsythe was referring, it is Canadian

women who experience this particular rate of violence from male partners (Statistics Canada, 2005).

Indeed, the gendered representation of family violence has carried over into CPS policy. Again, gendered terms such as domestic and family violence dominate CPS discourse, including the legislation itself (as mentioned previously) and the supporting regulations (the Matters to be Considered), which only refers to domestic and family violence and makes no explicit reference to abused women, but only to *abused family members* (Government of Alberta, 2007d).

Preferred Policy Choices Focus on Individual and Family Dysfunction

The study reveals that Alberta policy makers prefer policy choices that rest primarily at the individual or family level, implying that the problem of children's exposure to intimate violence is rooted in individual and family dysfunction. This is especially evident in the documents and media releases that promote the governments' overall approach to combating family violence, including the funding or endorsement of programs aimed at assessment, treatment and rehabilitation, and other attempts to *break the cycle of family violence*.

Abusing family members . . . are given treatment designed to *break the cycle of family violence* [italics added] and prevent its recurrence. (Hurlburt & White, 2003, p. 5)

We can *break the cycle of violence* [italics added] and make sure all Alberta's children grow up in safe and secure families. (Government of Alberta, 2004a, p. 4)

These [Roundtable on Family Violence and Bullying workshops] efforts will help communities and government partners find ways to *break the cycle of violence* [italics added] that can have a devastating and lasting effect on individual families . . . (Government of Alberta, 2004c, p. 1)

Other preferred policy choices focus on "educating" individuals and families about the detrimental impact of family violence.

The first priority in this [family violence] strategy will be to a campaign to educate children, youth and adults about bullying prevention and intervention strategies. (Government of Alberta, 2005c, para. 10)

There are things that can be done to ameliorate the devastating consequences of family violence on abused family members, on children, and upon society as a whole. These include increasing public awareness of the existence and the evils of family violence, and increasing the extent

and effectiveness of services designed to cope with the effects of family violence and to break the intergenerational cycle of family violence. (Hurlburt & White, 2003, p. 1)

In terms of CPS policy specifically, preferred solutions to children's exposure also concentrate on intervening at the individual level, namely with parents. CPS policy makers deem children to be at risk not only because of the violence that they witness but also because of their parents' supposed inability to care for them while involved in violent relationships: "Parents may not be able to consistently respond to a child's needs, negatively affecting the parent-child bond." (Government of Alberta, 2007c, para.7)

Both the training manual that is used in the mandatory training of all CPS recruits and the mandated guidelines (Matters to be Considered) that support Alberta's child protection legislation instruct workers to assess parental coping and insight. For instance, the Matters to be Considered instruct workers to assess "the ability of the parents to protect their children," including the protective capacities of both the non-abusing parent and the perpetrator (Government of Alberta, 2007d, para. 8). This suggests that both the direct perpetrator of the violence and the non-offending parent are represented as posing a risk to their children. Policy makers have not labeled non-offending parents as direct perpetrators, as such; however, their behavior is depicted as being central to children's well-being, and therefore, subject to CPS scrutiny.

The care giving parent has a reduced capacity for building and maintaining an empathic, sensitively-attuned relationship with the child. Parents who are traumatized may have decreased capacity for recognizing stress and danger to children. (Government of Alberta, 2005a, p. 6)

Children who witness domestic violence may not have such emotional support as the perpetrating parent is unsafe and the battered parent may be emotionally unavailable because of her own trauma. (Government of Alberta, 2005a, p. 11)

Degendered terms, such as *parent* and *adults* are used interchangeably, making it difficult to decipher who exactly is considered to be the focus of CPS policy (i.e., perpetrators or non-offending caregivers). However, some gender-specific references were found that suggest that *mothers* are considered to be the non-offending caregivers, as in the case of the above example ("*her* own trauma"). Furthermore, in the CPS training manual, one criterion for establishing parental coping and insight is that the parent must be willing to remain at a women's emergency shelter until the risks to children can be assessed (Government of Alberta, 2005a). Since female victims are primarily the users of *women's* emergency shelters in Alberta (Alberta Council of

Women's Shelters, 2009), it is likely that this criterion is referring strictly to non-offending mothers.

DISCUSSION

Labels establish a topic's domain or scope and offer a particular orientation to that topic (Best, 1990). Political and gender-specific terms such as *wife assault* and *woman abuse* have become *spousal assault*, *domestic violence* and *family violence*. This is particularly true in Alberta where government policy makers represent children's exposure to intimate partner violence within the broader, degendered discourse of family violence. This is seriously problematic. By locating or representing children's exposure within the framework of family violence, the experiences of abused women are equated with other forms of violence that occur in the family, such as child, parent, sibling, and elder abuse. This is concerning because a family violence representation obscures the fact that the violence that women experience at the hands of their male partners is substantially different from other forms of violence that occur within the family domain, notably sibling, parent, or elder abuse.

Indeed, researchers have demonstrated that a significant overlap exists between woman battering and child abuse in the same family (Edleson, 1999b); hence, linking wife abuse and child abuse is appropriate. However, discussing both wife abuse and child abuse within the degendered framework of family violence obscures the gendered nature of both forms of violence. Studies indicate that the most serious forms of intimate partner violence and violent crimes against children are perpetrated by men (Finkelhor & Ormrod, 2000; Guterman & Lee, 2005; Stark & Flitcraft, 1988). This author does not deny that some abused women abuse their children, but it is usually in response to their own victimization (Stark & Flitcraft, 1988). Men's use of violence against their female spouses and children can be understood using a gendered analysis that incorporates important concepts of power and control. In other words, men's violence within the family can be conceptualized as being a means to which they can exercise their authority to control their wives and children (Bowker, Arbitell, & McFerron, 1990; Stark & Flitcraft, 1988).

Similar relationships between intimate partner violence and other forms of family violence, such as sibling, parent, and elder abuse are less clear. This author challenges the assumption that a man who physically or sexually assaults his female partner does so with the same intent (and effect) as the sibling who assaults another sibling or as the child who assaults a parent. Men and women's social locations in society, and especially in the family, are significantly different and shape how men and women experience violence (Bograd, 1990). Therefore, any discussion of the dynamics of power

and control within the family domain, especially relating to violence, must include an analysis of gender relations. Therefore, given the nature of power relations and gender inequity, men's violence against their female partners must be regarded differently than other acts of aggression that occur in the home.

Moreover, by linking violence against female intimate partners to other types of violence that take place in the family, important factors that link women's experiences with all forms of male violence, such as patriarchy, misogyny, and oppression, are left unproblematized and seldom discussed (Dobash & Dobash, 1992; Dominelli, 1989). By representing it as family violence, men's violence against women simply does not exist as a social phenomenon. Violence against female partners and children should be conceptualized within the public realm of violence against women, which includes other forms of violence that women, as a group, regularly experience (e.g., rape, sexual harassment, stalking, prostitution, and pornography) and not the private realm of family violence. By representing intimate partner violence as family violence, preferred policy choices will centre around strengthening the family unit and its members and not on men's violence and women's social and economic inequality.

By subsuming children's exposure to intimate violence within the framework of family violence, policy makers also diminish our attention to women's victimization. A family violence approach assumes that it is the family or its members, namely children, that need to be protected, not women. As mentioned earlier, few references were found on the impact of violence on women. Thus, it appears that by considering child exposure as a form of family violence, policy makers are now more concerned about the indirect impact of exposure on children than on the direct impact of violence on women. This trend is evident elsewhere. For example, consider the current trend in the United States where a number of states have enacted stiffer penalties (e.g., increase in fines, longer jail or prison sentences) when violence in the home is perpetrated in the presence of a child (see Nixon et al., 2007). This implies that committing violence against the female partner alone is not serious enough to warrant strong criminal sanctions, and that harsher penalties are needed when children are involved. This author is not suggesting that children should not be viewed as legitimate or worthy victims; in fact, society's acknowledgment of the potential impact of exposure to intimate partner violence on children is a great step forward in the area of violence against women and children. Nonetheless, we must acknowledge, that while exposure to violence is generally not good for children's well-being, many children show little or no signs of emotional or developmental harm, suggesting significant variability among children's responses (Edleson, 1999a; 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, 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).

Not only have Alberta policy makers subsumed children's exposure within the broader framework of family violence, but they have also degendered the violence that children are exposed to. This is not only evident in policy makers' lack of references to gender and their prominent use of gender-neutral language, which at times appeared clumsy and awkward; but also by policy makers' insistence of viewing family violence as not "strictly a gender issue." All of this suggests that its degendered representation is both purposeful and deliberate, which is ironic given Alberta's high rate of violence against female intimate partners, as noted earlier.

Alberta's degendered representation of children's exposure to intimate partner violence is not surprising given its resistance to feminist values and beliefs (Rankin & Vickers, 2001) and gender-based policy options (Dacks, Green, & Trimble, 1995; Scott, Horne, & Thurston, 2000). Although the goal toward gender neutrality has been considered a typical element of the philosophical orientations of political institutions themselves (Rankin & Vickers, 2001), some scholars argue that Alberta politicians and policy makers have been exceptionally resistant to gender-based policy decisions. For instance, Dacks et al. (1995), contend that the within the past two decades the Alberta government has regularly implemented policies that were anti-woman, and that policy makers often voiced support for patriarchal and traditional ideas and structures, such as the traditional family and that politicians have mostly supported the party's neoliberal economic agenda and neoconservative social philosophy. Further, a degendered representation placates the men's rights contingent that continues to be vociferous in Alberta (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2003). As an example of this, in 1998, the Movement for the Establishment of Real Gender Equality (MERGE), a fathers' rights organization, filed a complaint with the Alberta Human Rights and Citizenship Commission (AHRCC) stating that a brochure for the Family Centre, an Edmonton-based counseling center, discriminated against men by portraying men as the abusers in intimate relationships. The Centre could not afford to contest the complaint and withdrew the original brochure and issued replacements to address the issue of female violence toward men. The ruling was the first of its kind in Canada. MERGE announced that it will use the legal system again to target other agencies that consider women to be the main targets of intimate violence.

Alberta policy makers' predilection for degendered policies can also be explained, in part, by the de-politicization and de-professionalization of violence against women that is occurring more broadly (Levan, 1996). Scholars note that within the past two decades or so, violence against women (including intimate partner violence) has been viewed more as a treatment issue,

as opposed to a gendered, political one (Levan, 1996). The trend toward a degendered analysis is also becoming increasingly predominant in social science research, significantly influencing public policy decisions (Berns, 2001; Levan, 1996, Nixon, 2007).

A degendered representation of children's exposure to intimate partner violence within the context of CPS policy is problematic on many grounds. First, by degendering the violence that children are exposed to implies that all members of the family experience violence equally, as both perpetrators and victims. With respect to intimate partner violence specifically, the current representation of family violence masks the reality that women tend to be the victims of the most serious forms of violence and that they incur the most serious consequences, including physical and psychological injuries (see Nixon, 2007). According to Canada's 2004 General Social Survey, female spouses were more likely to be victims of serious injuries than male spouses, and were twice as likely as men to report being victims of repeated violent episodes (Statistics Canada, 2005). Canada is not unique in its gendered nature of intimate violence. The National Violence Against Women Survey conducted in the United States from 1995–1996 revealed that women experienced more chronic and injurious assaults by their intimate partner than male victims (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Likewise, the 1996 British Crime Survey revealed that women were more likely to be injured than men (Mirrlees-Black, 1999). A degendered representation of violence, such as family violence, keeps these important differences hidden, allowing no opportunity for discussion on the gendered nature of violence. This author does not deny that women are capable of committing violent acts, but we must understand that men and women experience violence, especially within intimate relationships, in significantly different ways. Therefore, policies relevant to intimate partner violence (including children's exposure) must be informed by a gendered analysis.

Finally, a representation of children's exposure to intimate partner violence as a degendered, social phenomenon occurring within the family domain can lead to problems in how the solutions of violence against their mothers are conceptualized and operationalized (Bograd, 1990). Government policies aimed to help family violence victims may be ineffective or potentially dangerous for many women experiencing violence as they may not be viewed as innocent or legitimate victims and, therefore, undeserving of public sympathy. In fact, abused women will likely be held partly responsible—either as combatants who are equally participating in the *family* violence or as passive victims who choose to remain in dysfunctional familial relationships. If abused women happen to be mothers then additional blame is placed on them for being faulty or inadequate caregivers. This is evident in Alberta's CPS policies that prompt workers to assess the coping skills and parental insights of the non-offending caregiver (re: mothers) as part of their intervention strategy to deal with children's exposure.

Other scholars have also reported that CPS authorities routinely hold abused women responsible for their children's exposure to violence and for stopping their partners' abusive behavior (Humphreys, 1999; Magen, 1999), with some noting the common use of "failure to protect" clauses or the like against abused mothers (Trepiccione, 2001). Many Canadian provinces refer to non-offending guardians as "unable and unwilling" to protect their children, as opposed to failing to protect (see Nixon et al., 2007). By framing children's exposure as a form of family violence and holding abused mothers responsible (or at least partly responsible) is not only tremendously unjust, but it is illogical, ineffective, and unsafe. It is not unreasonable to believe that abused mothers will perceive such policies as threatening and punitive, and consequently will not disclose future incidents of violence to helping professionals, namely the police and shelters. If this is indeed the case, then women and their children will be in greater danger if they believe that they cannot seek assistance in preventing abuse by their violent partners.

By locating children's exposure to violence in the home within the framework of family violence, policy makers imply that the problem is the cause of troubled individuals and dysfunctional relationships. Alberta's proliferation of policies, such as those aimed at breaking the cycle of family violence, suggests that the identified problem is rooted in individual weakness and family dysfunction (e.g., poor communication or conflict resolution skills). This is not surprising given the domination of neoconservative politicians and policy makers in Alberta for the past 75 years (Smith, 2001). Generally speaking, the neoconservative ideological paradigm attributes social problems to individual weakness, deviance, or heredity (i.e., cycle of violence hypothesis) and not to structural or environmental sources (Mullaly, 2007).

Because the level of analysis remains at the individual or family level, the preferred policy choices will be limited and will primarily focus on those directly involved (i.e., victim, perpetrator, and children) and not on structural or systemic factors that condone and perpetuate men's violence toward women. Policies will aim at "fixing" victims, perpetrators, and children, as illustrated in Alberta policy makers' emphasis on "assessment, treatment, and rehabilitation"; and not at addressing broader systemic factors that contribute to men's violence and women's social and economic inequality. A poignant example of this is Alberta policy makers' preoccupation with caregivers' (read: mothers') parenting ability as a means to protect children.

Children who are exposed to violence in the home are deemed to be at risk because of their parents' (read: mothers') supposed inability to protect and care for them—not because they are exposed to men's violence against women. A substantial component of Alberta's child protection response includes assessing the coping skills and parental insights of the non-offending caregiver. Undoubtedly, policies that construct children's exposure to intimate partner violence as a problem of poor parenting by

mothers are problematic. Although research evidence concludes that being abused can have a negative impact on a victim's parenting (Levendosky & Graham-Berman, 1998), a growing body of evidence demonstrates mothers are, in fact, not helpless, incompetent, and aggressive parents (Letourneau, Fedick, & Willms, 2007). Policy makers need to re-examine the prevailing representation of abused women as poorly functioning mothers who are too traumatized to adequately care for their children, as this may not be the case for many women.

If women's parenting becomes the defining issue for CPS, then little attention will be paid to their (and their children's) safety needs. As an example, in Nixon's (2009a) study, abused mothers stated that their CPS workers provided them little assistance to improve their safety, and instead, intervention focused primarily on their ability as parents. By problematizing women's behavior, policy makers divert our attention from the wider, political, social, and economic forces that contribute to male violence, including patriarchy, misogyny, and women's social and economic inequity, which contribute to the violence women experience within intimate relationships (Bograd, 1990). Consequently, preferred policy choices center on making abused women better mothers, and not on important factors, such as un/underemployment, poor social assistance policy, and the lack of safe and affordable housing. While counseling and support services are vital to abused women (and their children), they will not in themselves end women's experiences with violence. Instead, financial and psychological independence are key factors that prevent women from entering or staying in abusive relationships (Gurr, Mailloux, Kinnon, & Doerge, 1996). Therefore, CPS policies need to incorporate the provision of resources to abused mothers so that they can access safe and affordable housing, legal services, child care, and other necessary benefits that will assist them.

CONCLUSION

The increased attention to children's exposure to intimate partner violence has prompted CPS authorities across the globe to make changes to their policies in an attempt to protect children. Alberta, Canada, in particular, has recently enacted CPS policy changes as a means to protect children from the effects of exposure to violence in the home. This article discussed how children's exposure to intimate partner violence has been represented as a social policy problem in Alberta and how these particular representations are problematic for women and their children.

The study found that Alberta policy makers represent the problem of children's exposure within the degendered framework of family violence.

By subsuming it within the auspices of family violence, intimate partner violence is equated with other forms of violence that occur within the family, implying that intimate partner violence is no different than other forms of violence in the home. The result is that men's perpetration and women's victimization is obscured. By representing children's exposure as a problem of family violence, the preferred policy choices remain at the individual level, notably women's parenting; and fail to address men's violence and women's inequality.

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