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Intervening with Children Living with Domestic Violence: Is the System Safe?

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ABSTRACT

This article examines cross-sector relationships that facilitated or impeded effective responses to women and children experiencing domestic violence. It reports on the findings of a study of 54 Australian professionals working in either statutory child protection, family law, or domestic violence and community services. Qualitative data gathered from focus groups with participants is the research base for this article. The study found that overwhelmingly the focus group participants described myriad policies and practices in the public sphere that could compound the impact of men's violence against women in the private sphere.

IMPLICATIONS

- Comprehensive risk assessments should attend to assessing the risks posed by institutions of the state.
- The findings are particularly relevant to practitioners and policymakers who wish to work in socially just ways, which begin with rendering visible the coercive tactics of the state.

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Violence against women generally, and intimate partner violence specifically, is one of the most common manifestations of human rights abuse in Australia (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2012). Although intimate partner violence cuts across cultural, religious, and socio-economic boundaries, disproportionately higher rates exist amongst marginalised populations (Cox, 2015), making this a particularly salient issue for social workers. Irrespective of their field of practice, social workers collaborate with other service providers to promote the safety and wellbeing of women and children and the accountability of perpetrators, who are mainly but not only men (Cox, 2015). The social work remit also encompasses interrogating the machinations of the complex legal and service system in order to produce knowledge that illuminates the barriers and facilitators of socially just responses. Such knowledge can lead to innovative advancements that ensure survivor safety and perpetrator accountability.

Women generally and women from marginalised communities disproportionately experience challenges navigating complex legal and service systems when they attempt to seek safety for themselves and their children from violent and controlling male partners (Laing, 2017; Nixon & Humphreys, 2010). Hester (2012) used the metaphor of navigating

life on three disparate planets to describe the challenges that women survivors face when agents of the state including statutory child protection services (CPS), family law, police, and other professionals become involved in their lives. Weeks (1996) argued that state institutions and their actors recreate and perpetuate the gendered power relations that lie at the heart of intimate partner violence. Others have extended this structural, gendered analysis to considerations of the parallels between the coercive tactics used by domestically violent men in the private arena and the coercive tactics used by social workers (Keeling & van Wormer, 2012) and judicial officers (Ptacek, 1999) in the public arena.

Herman (1992) argued that legislation, judicial processes and professional practices compound women's and children's trauma, a process referred to as "secondary victimization" (Laing, 2017) or "secondary abuse" (Roberts, Chamberlain, & Delfabbro, 2015). Gender theorists argue that institutions of the state and their actors, like families, are gendered (Connell, 2000; Hearn, 1994) and thus can engage in oppressive practices that produce and reproduce what Connell (2002) referred to as the "gender order" and "gender regime". Drawing upon the *Power and Control Wheel* (Domestic Abuse Intervention Project, n.d.) as a conceptual framework, this article examined the accounts of 54 front-line professionals including police officers, lawyers, social workers, men's behaviour change program facilitators, child protection workers, and other human and community workers involved in providing services to women and children who experience domestic violence. It identified a number of gender-biased institutional practices that parallel the tactics deployed by domestically violent men in the private sphere.

Literature Review

Domestic violence is a pervasive social problem oppressing large numbers of women and children across the globe (World Health Organisation, 2005) and within Australia. The 2012 Personal Safety Study of 17,000 Australians found that 1 in 4 women have experienced physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner since age 15 (Cox, 2015) and that more than 400,000 women were assaulted when pregnant and more than half-a-million children reportedly witnessed domestic violence (Cox, 2015).

The deleterious impact on children's and young people's health and development is unequivocal and well documented (Holt, Buckley, & Whelan, 2008). Although contested (Featherstone & Trinder, 1997), exposure to domestic violence is now recognised as a distinct form of child maltreatment in many English-speaking, westernised child welfare jurisdictions.

Naming and framing exposure to domestic violence as a child protection issue has meant that the powers of the state, armed with a legal mandate to ensure the safety and wellbeing of children and young people, are increasingly harnessed to intervene in the lives of families with fathers who use violence and control. Research using a case file analysis of child protection documents reports a higher rate of up to 32% (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2010). Moreover, allegations of exposure to domestic violence were present in 68% of matters in the Australian Family Law Court and 48% in the Federal Magistrates courts (Moloney et al., 2007).

Intervention frequently draws upon societal institutions such as statutory child protection services (CPS), the police, and the courts. Women survivors of domestic violence with children frequently find themselves entangled in a complex legal and service system.

A growing body of evidence documents their experiences within this system and particularly attends to their perceptions of the shortcomings of social workers and other professionals in the child protection system (Hazen, Connelly, Kelleher, Landsverk, & Barth, 2004), the family law court (Hester, 2012; Keeling & van Wormer, 2012; Laing, 2017), and the civil and criminal justice system (Neilson & Renou, 2015).

The need to improve the institutional responses to women and children experiencing domestic violence is well documented (Featherstone, Morris, & White, 2014; Humphreys & Absler, 2011). These institutional responses have been variously problematised as an issue grounded in: fragmented systems operating from contradictory mandates, agendas, and cultures (Hester, 2012); the bureaucratisation of child welfare systems governed by process-driven, decontextualised risk-assessment tools (Gillingham & Humphreys, 2010); disagreement amongst professionals regarding how best to understand domestic violence (Australian Law Reform Commission & NSW Law Reform Commission, 2010); the narrow framing of domestic violence as discrete incidents rather than as a pattern of coercive control (Stark, 2007); a lack of interagency collaboration (Banks, Landsverk, & Wang, 2008); and the rise of neo-liberalism and its impact on the welfare sector (Baines, 2017). Improvements to child protection practice with women and children experiencing domestic violence are thus often predicated on the need to improve interagency collaboration (Potito, Day, Carson, & O'Leary, 2009), to increase the domestic violence knowledge-base of child protection practitioners and policymakers (Mandel, 2015), and to provide differential response pathways and reform legislation and policy (Humphreys & Healy, 2017). Notwithstanding the myriad policy and practice initiatives that should catalyse improved service delivery to women and children experiencing domestic violence, significant improvements remain elusive.

A less investigated factor impeding improved service delivery is the influence of structural inequality, particularly in the form of institutionalised sexism. However, recently there has been an increasing recognition of how “gender blind practices” in CPS are entrenched, pervasive, and impede reform (Featherstone, Hooper, Scourfield, & Taylor, 2010; Humphreys & Absler, 2011). Such practices substantively hold women survivors of domestic violence accountable for “failing to protect” children (Strega & Janzen, 2013). Heward-Belle (2016) provided an analysis of how male perpetrators might be rendered visible and better conceptualised within the child protection frame.

Although there is a significant body of knowledge about the tactics deployed by domestically violent men in the private sphere, the institutional policies and practices of the state that exert power and control over women survivors of domestic violence is not as widely researched. Tactics in the private sphere are described in the *Power and Control Wheel* (Domestic Abuse Intervention Project, n.d.), which is arguably the most well-recognised visual depiction of women's perceptions of the pattern, intent, and impact of violence and abuse occurring in the domestic sphere.

Using the language of more than 200 women survivors of domestic violence, the most commonly deployed tactics described are using: intimidation; emotional abuse; isolation; minimising, denying, and blaming; manipulating and harming children; using male privilege; economic abuse; and coercion and threats. The wheel is widely used in a variety of settings including women's support services and men's behaviour change programs as an educational and therapeutic tool. It has also been adapted to analyse the maltreatment of children in the context of domestic violence.

Keeling and van Wormer (2012) used the wheel as a conceptual framework to analyse the accounts of women survivors and found that women often perceived social workers to use coercive intervention tactics, which paralleled those described in the wheel. Ptacek (1999) also used the wheel to represent how judicial responses can both compound and reduce women's entrapment. This article complements Keeling and van Wormer's (2012) and Ptacek's (1999) analysis by using the *Power and Control Wheel* as an analytic framework to examine the accounts of 54 managers and front-line professionals involved in providing services to women and children who experience domestic violence.

Method

Sources of Data

This article is based on data collected from a case study within the PATRICIA (PATHways and Research InterAgency practice) project, which examined cross-sector relationships between statutory CPS, family law, and domestic violence and community services responding to women and children experiencing domestic violence. Data for this article comes from 5 separate focus groups held with 54 professionals from statutory child protection, domestic violence services, and legal services in two locations.

Participants

Participants consented to participating in this study, using processes approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Melbourne (ID 154571). Participants were front-line managers and workers involved in providing services to families with fathers who were or had been domestically violent to their female partners and children. Fifty-four participants from statutory child protection, child and family health, domestic violence services, and legal services from two separate local government areas were recruited through the distribution of an advertising flyer. Managers and direct front-line caseworkers comprised the statutory CPS group. Four lawyers and two mediators comprised the legal group. The domestic violence group was made up of professionals providing generalist and specialist services to families experiencing domestic violence including family support services, men's behaviour change programs, police, women's refuges, women's safe at home services, and child and family health services.

Data Collection and Analysis

Focus groups were facilitated by either one or two doctoral-level social workers and a senior social work researcher, all of whom had significant experience and knowledge in the child protection and domestic violence fields. Two of the focus groups were held with child protection staff, two with domestic violence service providers, and one with family law service professionals at two different sites. The focus groups explored the opportunities for, and challenges in, collaboration in cases involving the intersection of child protection, domestic violence, and family law issues.

A focus group method, as described by Bryman (2012), enabled the researchers to ask tightly defined questions to a group of people known to have subject matter expertise and experience. Moreover, this method facilitated the collaborative construction of meaning.

This aligns with feminist perspectives, which contend that understanding complex social phenomena is best achieved through relational, social practices (Wilkinson, 1998). Alston and Bowles (2011) argued that postmodern feminist epistemology assumes that meaning is constructed rather than discovered. In this understanding of knowledge, it is clear that different people may construct meaning in different ways, even in relation to the same phenomenon (Crotty, 1998). This aligns with much qualitative research that is more interested in uncovering knowledge about how people perceive and feel about particular circumstances, rather than determining whether there is a universal truth inherent within their perceptions and feelings (Thorne, 2017).

The data were analysed following the techniques of thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). The written transcripts or data items were coded line by line and organised into categories and subcategories. NVivo 10, a qualitative software program, was used to code the data and enabled the establishment of the density and intensity of coded themes across the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Dense or strong themes were conceptualised as those that were expressed by numerous people across the data set or which were expressed by an individual and elicited strong agreement from other members within the focus group.

Initially, broad patterns or themes were identified: institutional policies; professional practices; language used to describe domestic violence; impact of policies and practices; and ideas for improving practice. In the second stage, the *Power and Control Wheel* was adapted for use as a framework to further interrogate the data. The first two columns of Table 1 contain the established tactics deployed by male perpetrators that form the basis of the *Power and Control Wheel*. These are then categorised into a series of tactics, or themes; for example, “using male privilege” (see column 1, Table 1). Using the *Power and Control Wheel*’s thematic (tactical) areas, the themes identified in the first stage of the analysis were coded to identify examples of behaviours that reflected these themes at the institutional level; that is, in the responses of professionals to women. The adapted framework extends the analysis from the individual to the sociocultural, broadening the existing knowledge base focused predominantly on how women survivors are entrapped at the personal level, to an analysis of how professionals can compound women’s oppression in the public arena. The results of this analysis are summarised in Table 1.

Results

The analysis using the extended *Power and Control Wheel* identified institutional practices and policies that professionals perceived to be enacted that mirror the tactics of power and control deployed by domestically violent men in the private sphere. Examples of the tactical themes are now presented, together with examples from the data. Participants also described facilitating factors to enhance institutional responses to women and children experiencing domestic violence.

Using Male Privilege

A theme evident in the comments of legal practitioners was the perception of the legal system as patriarchal and embedding gender-biased institutional policies and practices. The following statement from a lawyer is illustrative: “The judges are mostly men. The

Table 1 The Extended *Power and Control Wheel* Framework

Tactic	Manifestations in the private domain	Manifestations in the public domain
Using male privilege	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Treating her like a servant • Making all the big decisions • Acting like the master of the castle • Being the one to define men's and women's roles 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Holding mothers to a higher standard of accountability than fathers • Prioritising fathers' "rights to contact" over women's and children's rights to safety • Expecting mothers to do a disproportionate amount of social and emotional work to help children heal from trauma in comparison to fathers • Holding women responsible for children's behaviour problems associated with exposure to domestic violence
Using children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making her feel guilty about the children • Using the children to relay messages 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making women feel responsible for the impact of domestic violence on children
Minimising, denying & blaming	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making light of the abuse • Not taking her concerns about it seriously • Saying the abuse didn't happen • Shifting responsibility for abusive behaviour • Saying she caused it 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using mutualising language to explain domestic violence • Failing to adequately respond to women's requests for assistance including to breaches of ADVOs • Instructing women to not disclose or to minimise domestic violence in family law proceedings • Failing to comprehensively assess tactics of power and control deployed by perpetrator • Excusing men's violence • Separating men's violence towards women from their fathering
Using isolation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Controlling what she does, who she sees and talks to, what she reads, where she goes • Limiting her outside environment • Using jealousy to justify action 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Controlling who women can live with • Controlling who their children can see
Using emotional abuse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Putting her down • Making her feel bad about herself • Calling her names • Making her think she's crazy • Playing mind games • Humiliating her • Making her feel guilty 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Constructing women survivors as "failing to protect" their children • Pathologising survivors' responses to abuse and oppression • Humiliating women through oppressive casework practices including record keeping practices
Using intimidation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making her afraid by using looks, actions, gestures • Smashing things • Destroying her property • Abusing pets • Displaying weapons 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making unannounced home visits • Gathering information about women and their children "behind their backs" • Engaging in deficit-focused case practices including risk-assessment processes and case conferencing practices
Using coercion & threats	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making and/or threats to do something to hurt her • Threatening to leave her, commit suicide, report her to welfare • Making her drop charges • Making her do illegal things 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Threatening to, and/or removing, children from their mother's care • Coercing women into "treatment programs" that focus on the symptoms of trauma rather than the root causes
Using economic abuse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preventing her from getting or keeping a job • Making her ask for money • Giving her an allowance • Taking her money • Not letting her know about access to family income 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing an insufficient "safety net" • Having unaffordable safe housing • Defunding/reducing funding to specialist domestic violence informed women's services

politicians making the laws are men. And they're a particular type of man. Like they're older, affluent, connected." The idea that many judicial actors held "very patriarchal, staid and conservative" attitudes, irrespective of their gender, was a strong theme across the child protection and domestic violence workers' data set. Moreover, there was a strong perception that mothers were held to a higher standard of accountability in regard to parenting when compared to fathers. A men's behaviour change program facilitator's statement reflected a sentiment shared by participants regarding the invisibility of institutionalised sexism: "It's the patriarchal system that we are all entrenched in and can't even see it most of the time."

Among legal actors there was a strong perception that domestically violent men had significant advantages over women survivors within a patriarchal system. A family law mediator identified the advantages that domestically violent men had during mediation, a process predicated on the assumption that parties hold equal power from which to negotiate:

[Y]ou've got people who have been completely disempowered in their family relationships attempting to negotiate when there's not a chance that they're going to be able to do that. Where there is a really good chance that the perpetrator is going to be able to do that really well ... so we need to understand that there's this friction point and that will always prevent us from getting complete safety for a woman in that situation.

A theme across all focus groups was the perception that many professionals in the service system held gender-biased attitudes that influenced the way they made meaning of people and events and influenced the way they carried out their duties. A police officer expressed his opinion that police culture embedded risks to women survivors of domestic violence:

[T]he actual police culture is very, that sort of footy (football) sort of culture ... A lot of them [male police officers], I would suggest, like statistically would be perpetrators of domestic violence themselves to some degree. And then they're meant to be going out and investigating domestic violence. And if they're like "oh he's just doing that", they're not going to have a problem with that because they think that's what I'd do sort of thing.

Although it must be noted that it is difficult to accurately estimate the prevalence of domestic violence perpetrated by police officers (Wetendorf, 2014), it is deeply concerning that professionals hold a perception that police officers comprise a significant proportion of the population of men who use violence and control against women. Of particular relevance for this study is the question of what impact such a perception would have on interagency collaboration.

Using Children

A theme among participants whose work interfaced with the family law system was the perception that men's interests, particularly in relation to men's rights to child contact, outweighed women's and children's rights to live free from violence and coercive control. A domestic violence worker perceived that some police officers justified men's violence as "reasonable" in cases where fathers had been granted limited access to their children. A theme identified by participants in all professional groups was the perception that there is a fundamental bias in the family law court that privileges fathers' rights for contact over women's and children's rights for safety. They believed that this bias

opened a door for men to continue to exert power and control over women and children. A legal mediator noted:

I'm really shocked at how many families ... are referred to us where children have been injured, have head injuries that have happened by their fathers or by a caregiver and then they might do time in jail or whatever and then they get to have access with their children.

A lawyer agreed with this perception, saying that in their view the judiciary often failed to understand the impact of domestic violence and made orders that "prolonged the child abuse". A social worker concurred, perceiving that the courts are complicit in making orders that make it difficult for women to become free of their violent ex-partners:

[I]f they're leaving a situation where there is domestic violence, the courts are really allowing contact to be often used as a means of control, where that person still has control over children and the parent, the mother and when the interests aren't really about the children.

Child protection workers who had been involved in family law court matters expressed dismay about many orders and questioned the domestic violence knowledge base of some members of the judiciary who "often let access go ahead even where there are concerns" about domestic violence and sexualised violence against children. They expressed concerns about some judicial decisions and held the view that many judges did not adequately understand the dynamics and impact of domestic violence on women and children.

Using Intimidation, Coercion, and Threats

A theme identified by legal actors and domestic violence workers was the perception that most women they worked with felt intimidated, threatened, and coerced by child protection workers. Coding revealed that child protection workers were constructed as agents of a "punitive system that perpetuates power and abuse back on women". A subtheme identified was the workers' and clients' use of active concealment to avoid child protection intervention. Statutory CPS discussed concealment as a protective strategy used to prevent child removal: "This woman has a baby that she's too scared to say anything about [domestic violence] because CPS will use that to remove her child." Workers from domestic violence services in particular expressed the view that it was sometimes their job to protect women and children from the child protection system.

There was a wide gulf between child protection (CP) workers and other professionals in relation to how they perceived the enactment of statutory child protection practice. For example, most child protection workers perceived that they established effective partnerships with women survivors, a view that was not shared by other professional groups. A further theme that emerged was their perception that they were holding abusive fathers to account and they cited numerous departmental training initiatives that had been implemented in order to improve practice in this respect. However, one child protection worker expressed the view that

we're another person that can have all this sort of control over victims ... so I think we can sort of be seen as another domestic violence kind of perpetrator in some ways because we come in and be like "If you don't leave that person now, we're going to take your kids and we're going to do all this." And then I think we're intimidating parents more too that are already traumatised and already had all these bad sort of experiences of being controlled and manipulated and then we come in and kind of do the same thing in some ways.

Despite the best intentions of individual child protection workers, the power inherent within statutory CPS was a theme identified that precluded them from being trusted by women survivors and thus made it difficult to form a working alliance.

Minimising, Denying, and Blaming

Across professional groups, there was a strong perception that despite legislation defining domestic violence broadly, in practice non-physical forms of violence were not prioritised. This resulted in minimising and denying the dynamics of domestic violence by reducing it to physical assaults. For example, participants overwhelmingly believed that priority in statutory settings was given to responding to situations where men deployed physical or sexualised violence against women and children. Participants cited a number of reasons for this perception including overwhelming workload demands and a lack of understanding of the impact of non-physical coercive control on women's lives, and the belief, particularly among some general duties police officers, that coercive control does not necessarily constitute criminal behaviour. As a police officer commented, "They're not picking up ... I mean that either it's crime and crime related or it's the fluff around it. And the fluff is the important stuff in domestic violence."

The use of mutualising language to represent domestic violence as a relationship problem, arising from unresolved couple conflict, was a theme that was problematised in all focus groups. A domestic violence worker perceived that "[e]ven the solicitors have that attitude of just well no you're causing this conflict with your partner here, get over yourself. It's seen as a relationship problem."

A consequence of constructing domestic violence as a relationship problem was the perception that many professionals, especially judicial officers, assumed that domestically violent men could be good fathers irrespective of their use of violent and coercive behaviours. As a domestic violence worker pointed out, women and children were placed at risk when workers held such perspectives:

I can think of a recent case where the dad had the child, and the AVO [Apprehended Violence Order] was against him, but they [CPS] were saying let him supervise the access with the child, but the AVO is in place because he tried to strangle the mother.

Obfuscating responsibility was another way that professionals perceived that the impact of domestic violence on women and children was minimised. This was particularly evident in situations where women sought assistance from statutory CPS to protect their children from violent and abusive fathers with whom the family law court had ordered contact. The language that workers used to describe their perception of their agency's role highlighted a theme, which was of a ubiquitous culture of avoidance in relation to taking responsibility for ensuring women's and children's safety in these post-separation circumstances: "One of the tricky things ... is for us to be really clear with everyone involved ... we're a child protection agency, we're not a Family Law Court" (CPS manager).

Misaligned Policies and Practices That Contribute to Economic Abuse and Isolation

Discussion about misaligned government policies that resulted in women's economic disenfranchisement and isolation was a theme in every focus group. Women escaping

domestic violence were perceived to lack safe and affordable housing and access to specialist support services. A lawyer noted how women were penalised and at risk of losing their children due to the lack of affordable housing:

You can almost get a situation where you lose your housing because you've had domestic violence and you've lost your kids. Particularly if your housing was dependent on having your children in your care. And then you can't get the housing back and then you can't get the children back because you don't have housing and you can't get the housing back because you can't get the children back.

Participants from all professional groups perceived that women were often faced with deciding between exposure to continued violence or becoming homeless. They indicated that homelessness was often the end result for many women and children, some of whom were reported to be living in cars.

Growing Mistrust

In each focus group there was discussion of the overall impact of these practices and there was agreement that women's and children's ability to journey towards a life free of domestic violence was compromised. In particular, participants described that women who receive poor service learn a compelling lesson that the system is dangerous and not to be trusted. As a domestic violence worker put it: "If they [women] aren't being heard or not dealt with in an appropriate manner, they can downplay the domestic violence. So the response in future events, they will downplay and minimize it or won't even report."

Reimagining the System

Participants in every focus group, but particularly in the domestic violence workers' group, spoke despairingly of the predominance of neo-liberal policies and practices that had, in their view, resulted in the widespread closure of many specialist women's refuges and services and competitive tendering practices that pitted small services against each other. A very experienced women's refuge worker noted:

Nowadays we don't make a noise, we don't fight government legislation together. We had the refuge movement back in the old days and we did fight together and a lot of people together are a big voice that makes a difference.

There was widespread agreement in the domestic violence focus group that grass roots activism was needed to reimagine and advocate for a better system to protect survivors of domestic violence. As one participant put it, workers needed to come together as a united voice in order to advocate for change, despite their fears: "They can't sack every service. They can't defund every service."

Calls to replace the existing patriarchal system and replace it with an equality-based system that promoted women's and children's safety was a particularly densely coded theme, with many comments recording a perception that despite years of legal reform, women and children experiencing domestic violence remained at risk. The following quote illustrates: "We've had legislative changes, say like Family Court and even Criminal...domestic violence legislation so we've had legislation changes and while we have attitudinal...issues, we're not seeing the cultural shift in line with the legislation either."

Discussion

This study found that institutional policies and practices described by professionals can mirror the tactics of power and control exerted by perpetrators of domestic violence, expressed in the *Power and Control Wheel* (Domestic Abuse Intervention Project, n.d.). This model has been used to conceptualise how agents of the state can become complicit in mirroring the tactics deployed by domestic violence perpetrators in the private realm, resulting in the compounded oppression of women and children survivors.

Few standardised risk-assessment tools used in statutory child protection settings attend to the risks posed to women and children survivors of domestic violence through their involvement with the system. However, attending to the risks posed by the system through its use of tactics such as male privilege; threats to remove children; coercion and threats; minimising, denying, and blaming; and misaligned policies and practices is a necessary first step in reimagining a system that helps women and children journey away from domestic violence. Mandel's *Continuum of Domestic Violence Practice* (2015) provides a framework, which has the potential to transform systems that are “domestic violence destructive” to ones that are “domestic violence proficient”. Rather than compounding the oppression already experienced by women and children survivors in the private realm, domestic violence proficient systems seek to partner with women; hold abusive fathers accountable; promote equal parenting standards; and attend to multiple risk factors that may sit alongside domestic violence.

Limitations

As the sample size in this study is relatively small, there are limitations to the generalisability of the findings. It would be beneficial to conduct further research with a larger sample of participants including professionals from rural and remote settings. Future research using semi-structured face-to-face interviews with professionals could be employed to address the particular limitations of employing a focus group methodology.

Conclusion

Drawing on the oral accounts of 54 child protection, domestic violence, and family law professionals obtained via 5 focus groups; the *Power and Control Wheel*; and critical feminist perspectives on violence against women and children, this article explored institutional policies and practices described by professionals, which compound the impact of men's violence against women in the private sphere. Multiple policies and practices were described that could effectively compound the dynamics of power and control in the private domestic sphere and impede efforts to ensure that women's and children's safety and wellbeing needs were addressed. The accounts of professionals reflect their perceptions of the gendered constructions that embed the power manifest through societal institutions and provide insight into why it is so hard to shift practice. The findings are particularly relevant to any considerations of how to improve the service response to women and children experiencing domestic violence.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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