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## Marshalling the Evidence: Using Intersectionality in the Domestic Violence Frame

### **Abstract**

*The movement against domestic violence has achieved a number of successes in challenging violence between intimate or formerly intimate partners and in providing services for survivors of domestic abuse. It has, in effect, mainstreamed the message that domestic violence is common and dangerous to women of all backgrounds. In this article, we look closely at statistical evidence around prevalence, gender, ethnicity, and poverty to investigate this claim. We argue that the framing of domestic violence could be advanced through the use of a social movement frame that draws on issues of intersectionality.*

### Introduction

To hold traumatic reality in consciousness requires a social context that affirms and protects the victim and that joins victim and witness in common alliance. For the individual victim, this social context is created by relationships with friends, lovers, and family.

For the larger society, the social context is created by political movements that give voice to the disempowered (Herman 1992, 9).

Judith Herman's words are as relevant today as they were in 1992. They provide the springboard from which to understand the centrality of a social movement to an effective response to support survivors of domestic violence. It is with this core concept in mind that this article explores the framing of domestic violence and the evidence base which supports the changing social and cultural contexts of late capitalist countries such as Australia, UK, and the United States. In particular, we are interested in exploring one strand of the women's movement, the movement against domestic violence, and the key messages drawn from its feminist roots, namely: that domestic violence is common, that it is based in gender inequality and oppression of women, and that it affects women of all social standings, effectively cutting across stratifications of ethnicity and socioeconomic status. This message has been at the center of the movement talk and has framed the way the issue is both perceived by the public and addressed through policies and targeted services for women survivors and, to a lesser extent, children, and perpetrators. The message is articulated across a number of sites, from the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NCADV) in the United States to the BBC in the UK (BBC 2009; NCADV 2009).

It can be argued that this straightforward message, which is easily conveyed and unambiguous, during the past four decades has played no small part in transforming domestic violence from a private concern into a significant and widely recognized public issue that has considerable resonance outside the movement itself, within the spheres of both policy and service provision (Weldon 2002). This has been accomplished through "sustained interaction between a specific set of authorities and various spokespersons for a given challenge to those authorities," which corresponds to Tilly's (1984, 305) definition of a social movement. This concept of interaction is central to our argument that the evolving framing of domestic violence must reflect not only the qualitative but also the empirical evidence around this form of interpersonal abuse.

In this paper, we want to investigate feminist framing of domestic violence. It is our intention to contribute to feminist theorizing, particularly around issues of violence against women. Although we do challenge certain accepted views and attitudes within the movement, our aim in this deconstruction is not to inflict damage on a center of activism that has made ideological, material, and political gains for survivors of domestic violence. We are particularly conscious of Judith Herman's assertion that individual survivors of domestic

violence require a social movement which openly confronts and names the damage and destruction of domestic violence so that their individual stories of abuse, fear, and terror can be set against a backdrop of belief, rather than minimization and denial (Herman 1992, 9). We also are keenly aware that positive policy responses to domestic violence exist only where there is a strong and active women's movement (Weldon 2002). We therefore bring with us to this project a shared dedication to the ideals of the women's movement in ending violence against women, a belief that feminists working within academia can play a role in the activism of the women's movement, and a commitment to feminist ways of working together.

We begin by discussing the utility of collective action frames as a basis for exploring social movement activism and the discursive resources that are employed in this activism. Drawing on the work of Snow and Benford (Benford 1997; Benford and Snow 2000; Snow et al. 1986), we show that the way in which the movement against domestic violence has shaped public, academic, and activist perceptions of the issue has effectively structured and influenced the political objectives and outcomes of the work of the movement thus far. Collective action theory provides a framework for conceptualizing the movement talk that has characterized domestic violence activism. We suggest that there are now many challenges to this message which demand a more nuanced collective framing of domestic violence, developed through attention to the intersections of "race", gender, class, and disability (Almeida and Durkin 1999; Bograd 1999), together with the evidence base from both quantitative and qualitative research which has strengthened the understanding of the impact of social divisions on women's experiences of domestic violence (Tjaden and Thoennes 2000; Walby and Allen 2004). We contend that the dynamic nature of a social movement requires that framing messages are continuously revisited and readjusted in order to more accurately reflect the experiences of survivors of domestic abuse. In doing so, the movement increases the resonance of the message it sends.

Our aim is to explore the evidence underpinning the current frame with a view to creating a more nuanced and sophisticated understanding of the issue and how it can differentially affect those who experience and survive abuse. We ground our analysis in a review that marshals the evidence of the prevalence of domestic violence, its gender-specific nature, and the vulnerability of ethnic minority women and those living in poverty and use aspects of post-structuralism to support this attention to diversity. The article concludes by considering the implications of this evidence for the framing of domestic violence and considers the value of situating

this issue within the spectrum of violence against women. Our argument is based on our own experience as academics and advocates that an oversimplified message now obscures the evidence base, and that in order to meet the diverse needs of survivors of domestic violence and to campaign effectively on this issue, a more empirically accurate picture of vulnerability to, and experiences of, domestic violence is needed.

### Movements and Framing: The Feminist Domestic Violence Frame

Situating the movement against domestic violence neatly within social movement theorizing is not straightforward (Charles 2000). Nevertheless, the transformative elements which lie at the heart of the broad and diverse women's movement place it legitimately as one of the "new social movements." These are defined loosely as represented by collective struggles to pursue social justice through attempts to challenge oppression and the processes of discrimination which give rise to it (Buechler 1999; Thompson 2002) in noninstitutionalized forms of political action (Campbell and Oliver 1996). New social movements are most likely to have a significant impact on policy and legislation when they are able to shift and reframe the public's views of the issue at stake (Burstein 1999).

Much of the success of the movement against domestic violence has been assisted by the feminist framing of domestic violence which reiterates an unambiguous and straightforward message that domestic violence is common, dangerous to women, and affects women of all social standings, effectively cutting across stratifications of ethnicity and socioeconomic status. Dobash and Dobash (1992), who chronicled the early momentum of the movement against domestic violence in the UK and United States, have suggested that the articulation of key points around prevalence and gender has long been a part of awareness-raising campaigns and has been key to the ensuing success of the movement. The effect of this sustained campaign was that the movement became allied to the frame, in effect demonstrating that "the movement is the message" (Charles 2000, 33).

Frame theory arose from Goffman's (1974) work on frame analysis, although it has become increasingly developed and systematized as a tool for investigating social movement activity (Benford 1997; Oliver and Johnston 2000). Framing involves the interpretation of a given issue and the construction and expression of belief systems, narratives, and actions that encapsulate, direct, and sustain the values of the movement (Benford 1997). Collective action frames are, essentially, the messages that social movements send, as these

beliefs, narratives, and actions are circulated between movement actors, featured in movement literature and campaigns and passed to other actors in the political and social spheres. Crucially, social movement theorists have pointed out that these messages or frames are the direct result of human action; they do not develop haphazardly but are instead the result of “agency and contention at the level of reality construction” (Benford and Snow 2000, 614). Framing is an active, political process and the resultant frames are vital tools in social movement struggles to raise awareness of specific issues and bring about directed social change.

The results of social movement campaigns and activities are therefore not random or accidental but are instead the outcomes of planned, directed work by movement actors, including affiliated individuals as well as allied organizations (Weldon 2002). The deliberate and processual nature of framing implies that the construction, maintenance, and circulation of social movement talk are politically and strategically expedient for a movement and its goals. The creation of collective action frames is thus a central feature of social movements, which put forward new interpretations of dominant paradigms and “articulate alternative, politicized interpretations of their needs” (Fraser 1989, 157). The wider acceptance of social movement frames and messages may be one marker of measurable social change.

Framing, then, can be seen as a central, but constantly changing process in the creation of social movement talk and an important strategy in bringing about social change. Framing relies on the articulation of oppositional social movement discourses, which are generated in order to resist and contest more dominant and widely accepted discourses that have had greater cultural resonance. The elements of a discourse, which can include speech acts, a specific vocabulary, written texts, and personal narratives, all have a role to play in the construction of a collective action frame. Those successful frames that endure are used widely and are generally characterized as an accepted social reality which can eventually become markers of the discourse. They become important discursive resources which set the parameters and terms of the central issues or concerns taken up by a social movement. This relationship between collective action frames and discourses is vital for understanding how the movement against domestic violence has constructed a successful frame across a number of institutional and policy arenas (Keck and Sikkink 1998), thereby establishing a discourse of domestic violence which has resonance both within and beyond the movement itself.

The resonance and success of a social movement message is likely “to do with the empirical credibility of the collective action frame” it puts forward (Benford and Snow 2000, 620). Within the movement against domestic violence, the credibility of claims around prevalence, gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status have been staunchly supported by narrative accounts of survivors of domestic violence, which have been an important element of establishing the issue in the public sphere, ascertaining the needs of survivors and lobbying for the support needed to meet those needs. Narrative accounts that emerged from refuges and other organizations affiliated to the movement have featured prominently in movement talk and have contributed significantly to an evidence base drawn from both qualitative and quantitative data on domestic violence.

This framing of domestic violence has, however, consistently been subject to attack. This is no surprise. Policy responses to alternative framings of domestic violence can be seen in the American, Canadian, and Australian cases (Mann 2008; Phillips 2006; Roberts 2002; Schecter 1982; Weldon 2002). Outside of the policy arena, aspects of the men’s movement which have been most active in relation to the issues of family law and child contact have vocally and systematically attacked the feminist framing of domestic violence arguing against both its gendered nature and frequency (Berns 2004; Flood 2004). While the most vocal and overt, this group is not the only source of dissent.

Paradoxically, in the domestic violence arena, as these needs are increasingly recognized and met from within mainstream services, the control of “the message” and the notion of what and who constitutes the social movement can become increasingly difficult to discern. A peak umbrella organization mobilizing advocacy and campaigning, such as Women’s Aid in the UK, now finds itself working closely with police and health workers who have not been noted in the past for their “feminist politics”. In some circumstances, these professionals clearly articulate a gendered perspective on domestic violence that aligns with the original framing of the social movement. Alternatively, they may challenge this framing and, through their work practices, undermine key elements of an intervention based on a gendered or feminist analysis of the way in which power and control are asserted within relationships of intimacy. As the issue of domestic violence has become “mainstreamed,” drawing on service provision from professionals who have traditionally held so called “gender neutral” stances to service provision in the health, welfare, and criminal justice sectors, the gendered basis of domestic violence has also come under question (Dutton and Nicholls 2005; Felson 2002; Mills 2003), as have issues

of ethnicity, culture, and poverty (Bonilla-Santiago 2002; Grossman and Lundy 2007; Tjaden and Thoennes 2000).

The dilution of the original feminist framing of domestic violence coincides not only with the mainstreaming of the message into a proliferation of intervention responses but also with the flagging influence of feminism as a political and social movement in late capitalist societies. It is therefore unsurprising that a framing of domestic violence that has its roots in a feminist analysis is now under attack. Any reworking of the key messages about domestic violence will therefore intersect with the changing face of feminism, shifting as it has from a monolithic analysis of patriarchal oppression to one in which the diverse ways in which discrimination and oppression manifest themselves in the lives of women are recognized and acknowledged.

We take the stance that frames do not have to be systematically accepted, even within the movement. Debates can occur, which are “essentially disputes over reality” (Benford and Snow 2000, 626). Support for the “realities” of domestic violence with particular attention to the intersectorial frame of poverty and race can be provided by drawing together aspects of the evidence base in these areas. Such work is undertaken to enrich the growing discourse in the violence against women movement which responds to the demand for both more evidence and greater attention to difference. We wish to continue to refine the ways in which we think and talk about domestic violence in terms of gender, prevalence, ethnicity, and income. In tackling the issue of poverty, we respond to the challenge provided by Sokoloff and Dupont (2005), who state that “of the three systems interlocking systems of domination, class analysis is arguably the least developed (in comparison to race and gender) in this body of work” (40).

## Investigation: Examining the Evidence

### *Prevalence and Gender*

Of all the claims about domestic violence that have emanated from the movement over the past four decades, the assertion that intimate partner violence is an established and widespread feature of both OECD and developing countries is perhaps the most important (United Nations General Assembly 2006). The framing of domestic violence as a common occurrence has been consistently communicated by the movement, from the earliest days of consciousness-raising groups to the work of contemporary service-provision organizations and is supported by the survey data from North America, Australia,

and the UK. While prevalence and crime surveys are not consistent in the way that they respectively define and ask about experiences of domestic violence, when taken together, they do reveal that violence from known men is a feature of many women's lives.

Canadian data, for example, show that 7 percent of women have experienced partner violence in the past five years (Johnson 2006). In the United States, the National Violence Against Women (NVAW) survey finds that one in five women in the United States experiences a physical assault at the hands of an intimate or formerly intimate partner in her lifetime (Tjaden and Thoennes 2000). Like the data from the United States, Australian data show similarly high rates of violence. Three Australian prevalence surveys suggest that rates of women experiencing intimate partner violence over a lifetime cluster around a figure of one in five [Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 1996, 2006; Mouzos and Makkai 2004].

The way in which researchers define domestic violence and ask about individuals' experience of it can have profound effects on the results. The comparison between the consecutive British Crime Surveys (BCS) suggests the methodology is critical. The first survey used face-to-face interviews, while the second allowed respondents the opportunity to anonymously report their experiences with intimate partner violence (using either a written questionnaire or a laptop). This led to a fivefold increase in reported prevalence rates (Walby 2004). The analysis of the self-completed questionnaires from the BBC (2001) also showed that approximately one in four adult women in England and Wales experienced some form of nonsexual domestic abuse, including financial and emotional abuse since the age of sixteen (Home Office 2001; Walby and Allen 2004). However, the survey also showed (using the same definition) that 17 percent of men had also experienced domestic abuse since the age of sixteen. While this is a significantly smaller percentage than that experienced by women, it is nevertheless considerable. Superficially, the findings resonate with some of the earliest and highly controversial US studies by Straus and Gelles, which also showed a high proportion of men reporting incidents of domestic violence (Straus 1979; Straus and Gelles 1986), and which continue to be replicated particularly if the original "conflict tactics scale" is used (Morse 1995).

This is one example of how methodological differences in the breadth of definition can lead to different reported and prevalence rates and potentially influence the way in which we define and thus frame the issue. Broadly speaking, we can see that the wider the definition of domestic violence used, the less gendered it is likely to become (i.e., Straus and Gelles 1986, 1990). At the same time, widening the definition to include nonviolent aspects of power and control,

such as financial abuse, can more accurately capture the experiences of women in abusive relationships. Thus, while the narrowest definitions provide results that are clearly gendered, they may not capture the experiences of all women. Women with disabilities, for example, may be more likely than nondisabled women to experience nonviolent means of control, including financial abuse or the withholding of medication within a controlling relationship (Nixon 2009).

More nuanced analysis of the empirical evidence which derives from approximately equal sampling of men and women and which goes beyond the initial incidence and prevalence data can be helpful in shedding light on the gendered patterns of domestic violence. It does however require an analysis which steps into the potentially controversial territory of severity. The BCS differentiates between emotional and financial abuse, threats and force, and shows that women who have experienced the more serious forms of abuse (force and threats) are also likely to have experienced emotional and/or financial abuse (Walby and Allen 2004). This nested effect could signify that there is likely to be a pattern of abuse which increases in severity over time. Those women who have experienced more severe physical abuse are also more likely to have experienced a range of abusive behaviors. This chimes with the current collective action frame around domestic violence, which has drawn heavily from narrative accounts of survivors to construct a picture of the development of escalating abuse. It is worth noting that because of the way the BCS questionnaire is structured, these figures do not include domestic sexual assault, an aspect of severity that is therefore artificially separated within the survey and data reporting.

Large-scale surveys in Canada (Johnson 2006), the United States (Tjaden and Thoennes 2000), Australia (ABS 2006), and the UK (Home Office 2001) all show that men can and do experience domestic violence. However, these studies equally demonstrate that domestic violence remains a gendered social issue. The in-depth analysis of all BCS data suggests that many more women experience domestic violence than men, with an estimated 12.9 million incidents against women occurring in 2003, compared with 2.5 million incidents against men (Walby and Allen 2004). Analysis of the most recent face-to-face survey component of the BCS reiterates this pattern, revealing that women make up 77 percent of domestic violence victims and demonstrating that women as a group are much more at risk of experiencing domestic violence than men (Home Office 2007). These data are particularly striking when set against how men and women reported experiencing associated fear. Men reported being significantly less frightened by their experiences of violence than women, which is important when we understand that

fear is one method of control and the threat or fear of violence can be an important means of establishing an imbalance of power and control in a relationship (Walby and Allen 2004).

US statistics also demonstrate that women experience more frequent attacks and the more serious forms of physical attacks (Tjaden and Thoennes 2000). While women were two to three times more likely than men to experience assaults involving pushing, throwing something at them, or grabbing them, they were seven to fourteen times more likely than men to report being beaten up, choked, or threatened with a gun by an intimate partner (Tjaden and Thoennes 2000). Canadian data indicate that women were more than twice as likely as men to sustain injury in domestic violence incidents and three times more likely to feel as though their lives were in danger (Johnson 2006).

It is not surprising, then, to find that the UK, Australian, and North America data support the notion that women are disproportionately the victims of spousal homicide. Women were killed by their partners at a ratio of at least two to one in Canada (Johnson 2006) and Australia (Dearden and Jones 2008), while American women were much more likely to be the victims of spousal (84 percent) or partner (81 percent) homicides (Johnson 2006; US Department of Justice 2005). Canadian data also suggest that a significant number of women who murder their partners were likely to be acting in self-defense in incidents where men were responsible for initiating force or violence in the incident (Johnson 2006).

Taken together, the empirical data continue to show that domestic violence is widespread. A dominant gendered pattern is, however, most graphically established through examining the issues of frequency, injury, and living in fear. These are issues which require exploring the complex issues of severity and take the message of the movement and its collective action frame away from the consistently quoted “1 in 4” figure into territory which is more complicated and more difficult to communicate, but more empirically sound. We would argue that this leads feminist work on the framing domestic violence into arenas where it is then better equipped to grapple with politicians, bureaucrats, funders, service providers, and the messages from the men’s movement, which have actively sought to minimize the gendered nature of domestic violence.

### *Ethnicity and Poverty*

The relationship between domestic violence, ethnicity, and poverty is neither clear nor uncontested. The collective action frame that characterizes domestic violence as cutting across boundaries of ethnicity and income risks minimizing differential experiences of, and

potential vulnerabilities to, domestic violence (Humphreys 2007). We suggest that these issues deserve closer attention, yet we are aware that there may be risks around using such analyses to further marginalize already vulnerable groups (Sokoloff and Dupont 2005). One of the strengths of feminist post-structural analysis, however, is its ability to examine issues that affect women on the periphery of groups, movements, and societies without relegating them to positions of inferiority. Instead, the aim is to explore diversity and clarify the dominant patterns which emerge from such an exploration.

The picture around race and ethnicity that emerges from empirical data is not always consistent, and findings can be complicated by the different terminology used to describe Indigenous, black, and minority ethnic groups. Analysis of data from the BCS shows that white, black, and Asian ethnic groups in the UK report similar rates of domestic violence (Walby and Allen 2004). In North America and Australia, however, the sharpest differentiations emerge when the experiences of Indigenous women are considered. These data suggest that Indigenous women are not only much more likely to experience partner violence, but the violence is likely to be more severe and the impacts greater. In Canada, despite lower rates of reporting, Aboriginal women are more likely to experience partner violence (Johnson 2006). In the United States, women from Indigenous backgrounds, including Native American and native Alaskan women, are much more likely to experience violence at the hands of a partner or spouse (US Department of Justice 2005). The NVAW survey found that Indigenous women in the United States experience the highest rates of domestic violence and were more than twice as likely to experience stalking or rape by an intimate partner in their lifetimes (Tjaden and Thoennes 2000).

This is a finding replicated in the Australian data which shows that while there is a general over-representation of Indigenous people as victims of violent crime, three quarters of the victims are women. Aboriginal women are twelve times more likely to be victims of assault than non-Indigenous women (Aboriginal Justice Council 1999), and a much higher proportion of this victimization was due to assault from family members (Ferrante et al. 1996). Most hospitalizations for violence-related assault for women were a result of spouse or partner violence (82 percent) compared with 38 percent among males. Indigenous women were nearly twelve times more likely to be victims of assault than non-Aboriginal women (Aboriginal Justice Council 1999 cited in Blagg 2000). The data, then, can support the message that domestic violence affects women of all ethnicities but also helps to develop a more complex picture around domestic violence, race, and ethnicity.

While there may also be correlations between severity and culturally specific forms of violence, we suggest that the increased vulnerability to domestic violence of minority ethnic women is likely related to poverty and income. Minority ethnic families in late capitalist societies are likely to be poorer than white families and this may be a key factor in explaining the increased likelihood of violence (Humphreys 2007). Referring to Hispanics in the United States, Grossman and Lundy (2007) say that “abuse often takes place within a context of poverty and underemployment, cultural isolation, under education, language barriers, and undocumented status” (1032). These factors are not specific to Hispanic groups, however, and may well be relevant to other ethnic minority groups living in the United States or other countries. For instance, Sokoloff and Dupont (2005) point to a number of recent UK studies that suggest that minority ethnic women living in low-income households experience “the most severe and lethal domestic violence” (44). It is an issue graphically illustrated by the London Homicide Reviews which showed that, of the fifty homicides which occurred in a fourteen-month period, 47 percent involved minority ethnic families (Richards 2003).

This established relationship between ethnicity and poverty raises a number of salient points and questions that warrant further exploration about this complex intersection (Humphreys 2007; Walby and Allen 2004). The BSC (Walby and Allen 2004) showed women living in low-income families were three times more likely to be living with domestic violence, an issue which led Walby and Allen to hark back to explanations of domestic violence that have been largely rejected by feminist analyses, namely the possibility that increased violence in homes where perpetrators are frustrated by an inability to establish power in an employment context, or where tensions and frustrations around a lack of money are already present, may increase the propensity for some men to use violence.

There may nevertheless be other explanations. For example, are women living in poverty more likely to experience violence because they have fewer resources to put toward escaping violence? In any situation of entrapment, there is greater susceptibility to escalating violence. Here, the issues for ethnic minority women may be critical as poverty intersects with other vulnerabilities for specific groups of women. Women from minority ethnic groups may take different help-seeking routes, have needs that cannot be met by mainstream domestic violence services, and less knowledge of what these routes may be due to both issues of language and isolation (Grossman and Lundy 2007). These issues immediately circumscribe the range of services available and limit the routes out of violence. At its most

extreme, for example, in remote areas of both Australia and Canada where many Indigenous women live, these entrapment issues may well be critical.

There are related questions to be explored around the relationship between domestic abuse and employment. While income is one measure of socioeconomic status, household income does not provide an accurate measure of individual members' access to that income (Walby and Allen 2004). Employment, however, may be one inroad into exploring the potential protection that socioeconomic status can provide. The BCS shows that women who are employed are at less risk of experiencing domestic violence (Walby and Allen 2004). This suggests that the social networks that can develop in employment could lessen isolation and thus women's vulnerability to domestic violence. These issues have significant overlap into analyses of not only higher unemployment rates among ethnic minority women (Yeandle, Stiehl, and Buckner 2006) but also disabled women's experiences of violence and abuse, given relatively low rates of employment within this group set against a backdrop of increased likelihood of social isolation (Barile 2002). Until further work is undertaken to unravel the threads of poverty, employment, and domestic violence to determine larger patterns of causality, we cannot be sure of the nature of this relationship, only that a relationship exists. Knowing that a relationship does exist, however, is sufficient cause to reflect on the current collective action frame and how new knowledge around ethnicity and gender might influence its refinement.

### Discussion: Updating the Frame

This paper has suggested that the traditional collective action frame that has emerged from the movement against domestic violence has provided a strong structure for advocacy for this strand of the women's movement. In maintaining the idea that domestic violence occurs across boundaries of ethnicity and income, it has however obscured the various forms that domestic abuse can take as well as the increased vulnerabilities to violence that some women face. We have examined the collective action frame articulated and utilized by the movement against domestic violence, paying particular attention to empirical evidence around prevalence, gender, ethnicity, and income. In doing so, we have reasserted the accuracy of the frame in its construction of domestic violence as a prevalent and gendered social issue, although one where the issues of severity now need to be addressed.

We have not challenged the assertion that domestic violence can affect women of all ethnicities and income levels but have

illuminated the dangers in advancing a frame that ignores the increased levels of risk that Indigenous and ethnic minority women and those living in poverty experience. To lose sight of these and other narratives is to construct the frame too tightly and risk further excluding vulnerable women. We have highlighted this as an area that needs development to ensure that the movement continues to frame the issue in a way that resonates across boundaries of income, culture, and ethnicity.

In exploring these issues, we draw on a growing body of work from scholars and practitioners which attends to the intersectorial nature of domestic violence. This work understands women in relation not only to their experiences of gender inequality, but also the social divisions of class, race, heterosexism, and disability (Almeida and Durkin 1999; Bograd 1999; Healey et al. 2008; Mann and Grimes 2001; Sokoloff and Dupont 2005). This attention to diversity speaks more directly to the experiences of a significant group of women who find themselves “on the margins” and do not necessarily identify gender oppression as the primary frame through which they understand their lives, even when they live with the violence and abuse from their partner or expartner.

The intersectorial “turn” is both enriching and challenging for the framing of domestic violence. Black and minority ethnic women have been particularly instrumental in leading this debate, drawing attention to the vulnerabilities to racism and the profound connections within extended families and communities which compound the problem of secrecy and loyalty for women living with domestic violence (Almeida 1998; Atkinson 2002; Mama 1989). The analysis of the ways in which cultural practices alongside historical experiences of colonization, war, slavery, and trauma create a context in which male violence is rationalized, excused, and reinforced has been the subject of continuous interrogation within this rich seam of work. In some instances, it has led to criticism of traditional models of intervention which encourage criminal justice routes as the primary response to violence. While not necessarily eschewing the criminal justice route, black and minority ethnic women have been prominent in the development of community-based responses, restorative justice, and community prevention programs as alternative and sometimes preferred intervention routes (Almeida and Durkin 1999; Blagg 2000; Coker 2004).

The work of Sokoloff and Dupont (2005) is particularly helpful in extending the exploration of the intersectorial frame and has relevance to the social movement agenda. They draw the distinction between the objective of giving voice to battered women from diverse, and often ignored social locations and cultural backgrounds

while recognizing the structural inequalities (race, gender, class, and sexuality) that shape and constrain the lives of battered women in different ways. The first objective they point out can lead down the road of “identity politics” with every individual holding a different standpoint—a unique and different struggle. For a social movement, such individualized politics can be problematic. The second frame emphasizes a more structural approach which focuses on the interlocking systems of class, race, and gender which perpetuate existing hierarchies of power, privilege, and domination, exploring how these hierarchies are supported and maintained. The individual story of multiple oppression, it is argued, needs to be understood within this broader analysis of interlocking systems of power and domination. In this process, a single, monolithic framing of domestic violence is challenged without losing the attention to the broader patterns of discrimination and oppression through which this destructive social problem is perpetuated.

Any work on collective action frames has to recognize that all frames are temporal, in that they are historically situated or framed by time and thus open to change through the processual and purposeful construction of new frames (Nicholson 1992). Just as differences in identity have proved to “generate a new set of pressures which have worked against metanarratives”, so could differences in ethnicity and poverty bring about an understanding of disproportionate risks and forms of violence that some women can experience (Fraser and Nicholson 1988, 33). As the movement matures and continually engages in interaction with other political actors, its message and collective action frame must become more nuanced, local, and specific and incorporate an awareness of the dominant patterns of inequality, severity, and issues of diversity within experiences of domestic violence.

While we accept that social movement organization “requires the projection of *sameness*” (Stephen 2005, 66), we fear that this sameness also poses a danger to the movement in that it may be bounding the issue more tightly and narrowly than necessary and thus creating a constricted reality that does not leave room for more nuanced understandings of the gendered, raced, and classed experiences of intimate partner violence. Essentialism, as Fraser and Nicholson (1988) point out, runs the risk of projecting standardized qualities and experiences onto all men and women when, in fact, identities and encounters “develop under historically specific social conditions” (28). We do recognize that there are real benefits in this projection of this sameness and are reminded of Spivak’s (1995) notion of strategic essentialism as a means of advancing the aims of the movement in a complex political context. This tactic has been

acknowledged by [Dobash and Dobash \(1992\)](#) along with the inevitable tensions that result from the marriage of strategic essentialism within a movement dedicated to bringing about social change. Referring to the tendency of some US-based groups in the early days of the movement to focus primarily on service-based development at the expense of activities directed toward more radical social change, they note that “there are varying degrees of pressure to conspire in continuing the traditional responses, which make it difficult to hold on to the vision of change” ([Dobash and Dobash 1992](#), 29).

Early feminist theories, as quasi-meta-narratives, consciously put forward a strategic concept of sameness in the pursuit of political objectives, but these can gloss over “differences among women and among the different forms of sexism to which women are differentially subject” ([Fraser and Nicholson 1988](#), 33). If we substitute “violence” for “sexism,” then we could very well be talking about the generalized message that the movement against domestic violence conveys and the overarching frame that marks domestic violence discourse. [Fraser and Nicholson \(1988\)](#) suggest that, while quasi-meta-narratives are useful tools in the campaign for social change, they can be tempered in a mature movement with more focus on smaller, localized enquiries and the resultant theorizing which acknowledges both the “endless variety and monotonous similarity” of women’s experiences, without denying either ([Fraser and Nicholson 1988](#), 34).

In order to make room for diverse experiences of, and vulnerabilities to, domestic violence, the collective action frame around domestic violence has more recently drawn from the broader conceptual framework of gender-based violence, or what the United Nations has termed “violence against women” ([Heise and Garcia-Moreno 2002](#)). The United Nations resolution (A/RES/48/104) sets out violence against women as “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life” ([United Nations General Assembly 1993](#)). Reframing domestic violence as one aspect of violence against women effectively makes a space for the recognition of culturally specific experiences while still highlighting the imbalance of power and control that runs through women’s experiences. This is particularly important if the movement is to take account of, and effectively integrate, the experiences and narratives of women from ethnic minority communities, Indigenous women, women living in poverty, and disabled women into the frame around domestic violence. Using this human rights frame to encompass the diverse experiences of women living

with domestic violence may be one way of moving ahead with national and international efforts to raise awareness of the many ways in which women can experience violence (Keck and Sikkink 1998).

The forms of violence that minority ethnic women can experience may take significantly different forms, including female genital mutilation and honor killings. They may, in fact, be perpetrated not only by intimate partners but also by other family members, including other women (Gupta 2003). Likewise, disabled women can experience a range of abusive behaviors that nondisabled women are unlikely to experience, such as the withholding of medication or medical aids (Howe 1999; Saxton et al. 2001). Equally, perpetrators of abuse against women with disabilities can include caregivers who may or may not be intimate partners. Neither group of women has thus far been at the center of the movement against domestic violence (Healey et al. 2008; Meekosha 1998; Siddiqui 2003). Including these experiences and narratives into the collective action frame of domestic violence aligns the frame with the concept of gender-based violence, providing a broader lens through which we can understand the gendered power dynamics as well as social and cultural conventions that lie at the heart of violence against women. Conceptualizing domestic violence using the violence against women frame also highlights the constellation of patterns and forms that violence against women can take while ensuring that the movement makes room for the voices of marginalized women.

## Conclusion

The challenge to any social movement is to retain its dynamism and relevance so that it can continue to provide effective advocacy and a voice for those to whom and for whom it speaks. We have outlined three potential directions for the future framing of the movement against domestic violence. None of these are new. They do however bring together different trajectories with a view to continuing to strengthen the political relevance of the social movement and “the movement talk” within it.

First, we argue that the traditional message that domestic violence is widespread, victimizes women, and occurs across all cultural and economic sectors needs to be reworked. Second, we suggest that the reframing of domestic violence should draw its direction from the rich work on intersectionality, with its focus on the interlocking patterns of gender, race, and ethnicity, class, disability, and sexuality. In this process, the attention to the evidence base which is constantly changing and being updated is critical. Finally, we argue that the

framing of domestic violence so that it is encompassed within the broader violence against women movement is essential and already occurring.

An updated frame of domestic violence that continues to highlight the prevalent and gendered nature of domestic violence while drawing attention to its “unraced” and unclassed nature is likely to be encompassing enough to support the ongoing work of the movement. With this approach, feminists and others working under the umbrella of the women’s movement can continue to challenge men’s violence toward known women while diversifying to produce historical and culturally specific understandings of how women can have very different experiences of the same issue. We believe that there exists a taunt balance between the uniqueness of women’s experiences of violence and a pattern of culturally and historically specific epidemics of violence against women wherein lie opportunities to develop the collective action frame that can advance feminist theorizing around violence and abuse.

## NOTES

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