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Intimate Partner Woman Abuse in Alberta's Child Protection Policy and the Impact on Abused Mothers and their Children¹

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Abstract

The increased attention to children's exposure to intimate partner violence has prompted child protection services (CPS) across the globe to make changes to their policies, including amending existing child maltreatment legislation and developing organizational policies in an attempt to protect children. Despite the well-intentioned nature of these efforts, they have been criticized for producing negative unintended consequences such as re-victimizing battered women, ignoring abusive men, and failing to protect children. To date, few studies have assessed the impact of these policy changes, especially from the standpoint of abused mothers. This article presents the results of a recent qualitative study that examined Alberta's CPS policy and its impact on 13 abused mothers. Most of the women considered the involvement to be unhelpful, intrusive, and punitive. Many experienced tremendous feelings of grief and loss and felt that they had lost their identity as mothers, especially after their children were apprehended. Almost all of the women discussed experiencing greater levels of stress and anxiety, which frequently resulted in serious physical and mental health problems. Finally, the women reported that child protection involvement, most notably, apprehension of their children, had a damaging impact to their children.

Introduction

Intimate partner violence is a common occurrence within child protection work. The recent *Canadian Incident Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect* (CIS) reveals that children's exposure to domestic violence is a common form of maltreatment investigated by Canadian child protective services, with almost 50,000 cases in 2003 being the primary or secondary reason for investigation (Trocmé et al., 2005).

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Child welfare jurisdictions have amended their protective legislation and developed organizational policies in an attempt to protect children (Nixon, Tutty, Weaver-Dunlop, & Walsh, 2007). To date, eight of the ten Canadian provinces/territories include exposure to domestic violence in their child protection legislation (Saskatchewan, Prince Edward Island, Newfoundland, New Brunswick, Alberta, Nova Scotia, Québec, and Northwest Territories). These changes allow CPS workers to intervene when intimate partner violence is identified, including the removal of children from the home. Such policies have sparked a contentious debate and have been criticized for producing serious negative unintended consequences, such as further victimizing battered women, ignoring abusive men, and failing to protect children.

A major criticism of the current CPS response to intimate partner violence is that abused women are frequently re-victimized by child welfare interventions. A number of scholars have noted that CPS workers tend to concentrate their efforts on battered women as attempts to keep children safe (Beeman & Edleson, 2000; Humphreys, 1999; Magen, 1999; Nixon, 2002). Workers routinely threaten and “warn” battered mothers to alleviate the abusive situation (Nixon, 2002), informing them that if they do not leave their abusive partner, their children will be apprehended (Aron & Olson, 1997; Nixon, 2002). When women remain in abusive relationships, some contend that CPS considers them as “failing to protect” their children (Magen, 1999; Nixon, 2002). Scholars argue that by concentrating on abused mothers, the problem of domestic violence becomes framed as what the mother failed to do rather than the perpetrator’s violent actions (Miccio, 1995).

Within child protection work, women’s inadequacies as mothers often become a defining feature of the problem. For instance, in their experience working with CPS, Whitney and Davis (1999) found that workers often focused on abused women’s pathology, their participation in the abuse, their alleged lack of concern for protecting their children, and their inability to choose non-abusive intimate partners.

Of most concern is that battered women may be reluctant to disclose their victimization to professionals, notably the police and shelter workers, if they believe that their children could be apprehended. In their study examining service delivery barriers for 43 battered mothers, Devoe and Smith (2003) found that many participants did not disclose abuse or refused to seek services because they feared their children being removed. Therefore, CPS policies aimed at child exposure may prevent women and children from getting the protection and support that they require (Zink, Kamine, Musk, Sill, Field & Putnam, 2004). This could not only be dangerous, but lethal for both mothers and children.

It is important to note that the researchers documenting the potential effects of child welfare practice on abused women and children have focused primarily on the experiences of CPS workers. Although these sources may provide important information about the CPS response to intimate partner violence, they cannot tell us the entire story. Notably missing from the literature are the experiences of abused women and children. Few studies have examined abused women's experiences with CPS (Jenney et al., 2005; Johnson, 2006; Porter, 2002).

Further, there has been little written on the impact of CPS policies aimed at addressing intimate partner violence on abused mothers and their children. Jenney, Alaggia, Mazzuca, and Redmond (2005) conducted focus groups with mothers who were involved in previous abusive relationships and had involvement with Canadian CPS to determine the policy impact on abused mothers. The women reported diverse experiences and feelings about the child welfare system – from very positive to harmful. The women who described positive involvement had workers who were knowledgeable and understanding about domestic violence, including the difficulty of leaving the relationship. However, other women felt misunderstood, scrutinized and revictimized by the system and perceived the intervention as unwarranted and unfair. The scant information on CPS policy that does exist, as well as the potential concerns predicted by researchers and women's advocates, raises questions about the effectiveness of such policies.

Methodology

This article is based on research conducted for a larger case study examining the construction of child exposure to intimate partner violence in Alberta's CPS policy and the impact on abused mothers. The larger case study is comprised of two components: a document review to determine how child exposure and intimate partner woman abuse has been constructed by policymakers and interviews with abused mothers to learn about the potential effects of such policy decisions. This article is based on the latter component.

Purposive availability sampling was used to select the participants, who were recruited through shelters and a local women's centre. Semi-structured, open-ended interviews were conducted with 13 abused mothers. The interviews lasted from one hour to 2.5 hours and were conducted in women's homes or second stage apartments. All of the participants received a \$25 honorarium for their participation. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and entered into a qualitative computer analysis program (NVivo 7). Data analysis strategies of

qualitative research, such as coding (first-level and pattern coding), constant comparison, and memoing were used to identify themes, sub-themes, and patterns in the data, as well as the relationships and interconnections between the themes and categories.

The study received ethics approval from the Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board at the University of Calgary. Research participants were informed about their formal consent - that their participation was completely voluntary, they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time, and that their identity as participants would remain anonymous. In terms of ensuring participant anonymity, women's real names were not used in the document. Instead, women were asked to choose a pseudonym for themselves at the beginning of the interview. Of all of the 13 women, only one woman chose to use her real name: The participants' pseudonyms are used in the write-up of this paper.

Results

Participants

Of the 13 mothers, eleven are of Caucasian background and two are Aboriginal. The women ranged in age from 21 years to 45 years, with an average age of 34 years. At the time of the interview, five women were working full-time, two were employed part-time, one was casually employed, and five were unemployed. With respect to income, five women earned less than \$20,000 per year (two of these less than \$10,000 a year); one participant earned between \$20,000 and \$40,000 per year; one earned between \$40,000 and \$60,000 per year; and two reported incomes greater than \$70,000 a year. Using the Low Income Cut-Off (LICO)² calculation for determining Canadian poverty rates (The Poverty Reduction Coalition, 2007), eight of the 13 women and their children were living in poverty.

One woman was married, two were divorced, five were legally separated, three were living in common-law relationships, and two were dating their abusive partners. Most of the participants had been in long-term relationships with their partners: Only two women reported having had relationships of less than three years, with five reporting relationships of ten or more years. Six participants were still in relationships with their partners at the time of the interview and two women reported seeing their ex-partners occasionally.

² According to 2005 LICO scores (1992 base) after tax.

The mothers had from one to five children for a total of 35 children; and one participant was pregnant at the time of the interview. Of the 35 children, 32 were 18 years or younger. With respect to these, two of the participants had only one child, four had two children, six participants had three children (one mother was also pregnant at the time of the interview); and finally, one participant had four children. The children's ages ranged from six months to 16 years, with an average age of eight years.

The Women's Experiences of Intimate Partner Violence

All of the women reported having experienced some type of relationship violence from a current or previous intimate partner. At the time of the interview, six of the 13 women were currently involved in an abusive relationship. Of these six women, four reported physical violence and two women reported experiencing verbal or emotional abuse only. Three women had recently left a physically abusive relationship and were single at the time of the interview. Two women continue to be emotionally abused and harassed by their ex-partners, with one woman having obtained a restraining order to protect herself. Finally, one woman had been physically abused by an intimate partner when she was an adolescent, and reported that her current relationship is not abusive.

Five women had experienced partner violence that could have resulted in serious injury, including being kicked, punched, hair pulled and choked; however, none of these had resulted in a physical injury serious enough for them to have sought medical attention. Another four mothers had been the targets of severe physical partner violence including being beat up and punched in the face repeatedly. Three of these women had sustained physical injuries, including a black eye, split lip, broken cheekbone, and severe bruising. One of these mothers had been held at knifepoint for hours by her abusive husband, along with her daughter.

Several of the women highlighted that they saw the violence as mutual, such that, at some point, both they and their partners had acted aggressively. One participant admitted to having used violence against her partner on more than one occasion but stated that it was either in retaliation to her partner's violence or self-defence.

Of the twelve respondents who had been abused by their children's father, only four had contacted a women's emergency shelter for assistance; at the time of the interview, two of these women were residing in a second stage shelter facility. Eleven participants had police involvement because of violence in their homes.

The Women's Involvement with the Child Protection System

Although the purpose of the study was to examine abused mothers' experiences of CPS in Alberta, two of the 13 participants had not had actual CPS involvement. Of these two, one woman was reported to CPS when she had contacted a women's emergency shelter; however, at the time of the interview, CPS investigators had not contacted her to follow up with the report. The second respondent had not had CPS involvement but, instead, had contact with Children's Services - the larger government ministry responsible for child protection in the province. At the time of recruitment, the participant believed that her involvement with Children's Services was synonymous with child protection, making her eligible. Not until these interviews had started did I realize that these women had not had actual CPS involvement. I elected to keep them in the study because their experiences with intimate partner abuse and Children's Services were enlightening.

Of the eleven women with actual CPS involvement, two participants had a Family Enhancement Agreement (i.e., voluntary service agreement); one had a Supervision Order; and the remaining eight participants' children had been removed from their care under a Temporary Guardianship Order (TGO), representing the removal of 20 children. Further, of the eight women with TGO's, two were told by their caseworkers that they would be filing a Permanent Guardianship Order (PGO) to permanently remove their children from their care.

Five mothers informed me that intimate partner violence was the primary reason for the initial CPS investigation. Another four women noted that CPS had become involved because of reports of domestic violence *and* other protection concerns, such as suspected child abuse, drug use, and parent-teen conflict. Another two women became involved with CPS not because of intimate partner violence, but because of child physical abuse and alleged child sexual abuse. Interestingly, both women had been assaulted by their partners; however, to their knowledge, CPS had never identified intimate partner violence as a concern. Only one woman was investigated (along with her partner) for physical child abuse, but at the time of interview, neither of them had been charged.

Strangely, not all of the participants were the direct victims of intimate partner violence, yet they still came to the attention of CPS because of it. Notably, two women reported that CPS became involved because of violence between *other* individuals. One participant's children had witnessed a physical altercation between her babysitter and her babysitter's partner. The other participant reported that the police had

contacted CPS after they responded to a violent incident between her fiancé and her mother.

The Women's Perceptions of the Child Protection System

Almost all of the women who had CPS involvement reported negative experiences, which can be categorized into eight major themes: 1. Women reported that CPS did not address issues of intimate partner violence, but instead focused on their supposed parenting inadequacies; 2. Women experienced tremendous feelings of grief and loss when their children were removed from their care; 3. Women believed that their mothering was devalued and that they could no longer identify as mothers; 4. CPS involvement frequently placed the women at greater risk of re-assault; 5. Women experienced increased financial insecurity; 6. Women felt blamed for their children's exposure to violence and were held accountable by CPS; 7. Women experienced greater physical and mental health concerns due to their CPS involvement and; 8. Women also reported that their children were negatively affected by CPS involvement. Each of these themes will be briefly discussed.

CPS Did Not Address Issues of Intimate Partner Violence

A major issue raised by the participants with respect to their CPS intervention was the lack of focus on intimate partner violence, even for those who came to the attention of CPS solely because of intimate partner violence. In fact, of the 13 women, only one mentioned receiving assistance with safety planning and only one other received referrals to domestic violence-serving agencies from her in-home support worker. When asked how their workers had dealt with their experiences of intimate partner violence, the majority of the participants indicated that it was not addressed. As mentioned previously, many had been instructed to attend a domestic violence group, and one was told to reside at a shelter; however, their major involvement with their worker did not focus on intimate partner violence. Instead, the interventions focused primarily on providing parenting advice and assistance, including how to run a bath for an infant, how to spend time with children, and how to provide children with a proper diet. One participant responded:

She [child protection worker] was like, 'We're gonna introduce you to an in-home support worker.' And, I can work with her over the next two weeks. [Did she say what that in-home support worker would do?] Basically just learn parenting skills... How to cope and

deal with having a new baby when really that wasn't even the issue. [In terms of you being victimized by [partner] was in-home support helpful?] Definitely not! [Did your in-home support worker do a safety plan? Did she talk about the violence towards you and how you were coping?] I did tell her [about the violence] and she said she's not here for us to focus on or dwell on the past but, 'We were to move on with your parenting and make sure that you're a good mother.' And that was never the issue! I'd start to get really mad with some of my social workers or in-home support 'cause I just from the start never got the connection; this was never about my parenting. (Christine)

The majority of mothers commented that their workers did not ask sufficient questions about the alleged violence in the family, including the incident(s) that led up to CPS involvement. In fact, nine women believed that their workers did not fully understand their situation.

She [CPS worker] didn't understand or she didn't ask the right questions. [Did she take the time to find out what was going on with you, with your kids, with [ex-partner]?] Nope [Do you think they understood what was going on?] Nope... She had her list of questions but I don't think she really listened. (May)

[CPS worker] didn't know anything about my file, didn't know anything about me, didn't know anything about my husband and told me that if I ever allow my husband to see my children unsupervised, that she was going to apprehend them... [Do you think child welfare understood what you and your family...] No, never. The worker that apprehended my kids knew me for about an hour and fifteen minutes and had never, ever met my kids 'till the day she came to pick them up with cop cars. [So you don't think she really knew enough to make that judgement?] She didn't know anything. (Dawn)

Further, despite CPS' contention that exposure to intimate partner violence is harmful to children, surprisingly, only two participants mentioned receiving services for their children who supposedly were impacted by their exposure.

Grief and Loss

As mentioned earlier, eight of the 13 mothers had their children removed because of exposure to violence, either as a primary or secondary

concern. It is important to note that CPS investigated only one of these eight women for physical child abuse. However, their children were nonetheless apprehended from their care and they were required to have their visits supervised. All of these women spoke about feeling tremendous grief and loss stemming from their children's apprehension.

I went insane. I broke down – nearly died. I couldn't stay there – couldn't stay in my house. I couldn't be around their clothes... To go from being a stay-at-home mom for three years, full-time to not having any kids... It's awful. [sobbing]... It's as if the three of them died. (Dawn)

The first two weeks that she was gone. I didn't move from her bed, I slept in her bunk bed just 'cause I didn't know what to do, I didn't know how to cope. I didn't want to get up [teary]. (Joyce)

I sleep on the couch every night. I can't sleep upstairs because he used to sleep by my bed... and I won't sleep up there 'cause it makes me cry. (Christine)

Devaluing and Loss of Mothering Identity

The women believed that their CPS workers devalued them as mothers. They also experienced a sense of loss of their mothering identity. For example, women felt a disconnection or distancing from their child, often stating that they no longer felt like their child's mother. The loss of mothering identity was a surprising finding, given that it has not been identified as a theme in literature to date on CPS involvement with abused mothers. On the contrary, it was a major issue for many of my participants, especially those whose children were apprehended from their care.

I don't feel like a parent. I don't feel like my kid's mother any more. I really don't... I feel more like a friend to her right now... because she isn't in my life. (Jo)

I feel like an aunt or something. (Christine)

Many of the women described the experience of losing their identities as mothers as traumatizing, especially since a number of them strongly identified as mothers and consider motherhood as defining them.

Those kids are the only thing I have. They're the ones that I've lived my life for every day, ever since I was seventeen. I wake up for them, I do the things I do today for them. I don't do it for me. I do it for them. (Jo)

We may not get her [daughter] back and, and then what's gonna happen? My whole life has been about raising these kids and being there for my kids. (Joyce)

Placed at Greater Risk of Re-Assault

Several women indicated that their involvement with CPS put them at greater risk of physical harm from their partners. One participant was left unprotected and alone with an angry husband after the police and CPS officials apprehended their children.

My husband was freaking out – he blamed it all on me. When the cop cars drove away, they left me there with him! They left me there with him in a rage! (Dawn)

Another participant was assaulted by her partner, which she believes occurred because of the added stress of having their children apprehended.

The second one [incident of partner assault] was when the kids got taken. (Jo)

Additionally, instead of reducing contact with allegedly violent partners, the participants commented that the CPS workers often promoted contact with their partners. Dawn claimed that CPS made arrangements for her partner to have regular supervised visits in her home, while she resided in a women's emergency shelter.

Supervised visits came and after the supervisor would leave, he would stay and would stay longer and longer until he moved right back in. By the time December 19th came around, my husband was living in our house full time. (Dawn)

Two participants admitted that they occasionally saw their partners, knowing that CPS would not approve. Christine stated that occasionally she allowed her ex-partner to sleep over because of the intense loneliness that she felt after her infant son was apprehended.

*I hate being alone: it's so depressing. [Is that why you let him back?]
Yeah. (Christine)*

Eileen also admitted to having contact with her partner when he dropped off money for her and the children because she could no longer financially support her family by herself.

I was making three grand a month. I went from that to six hundred dollars a month. He drops off money for me and the kids; I mean he's got to do it secretly. (Eileen)

The participants were also placed at greater risk because they no longer considered calling the police or shelter to be viable options if an intimate partner assaulted them in the future. Five women were adamant that they would not contact the police for assistance, fearful that they would become involved again with CPS. All but one of these five had had their children apprehended by CPS.

I wouldn't [call the police]. I'd probably just kick him [ex-partner] out... I'd take my son and leave but I wouldn't call. They [child protection investigators] said, 'You can always call us.'... but at that point I was like, 'I'm not calling you. Like there's no way I'm going to call you and tell you [that] I need help. 'Cause you'll just take my son!'" (Christine)

I wouldn't call the police but I would leave. I would take my next cheque and get on a bus. (Jo)

In terms of future shelter usage, three women declared that they would not seek refuge at a women's shelter, believing that the shelter staff would contact CPS.

I would recommend every woman in the world never, ever to do that [disclose violence to shelter staff]. (Dawn)

I would not call for any kind of support what so ever. (Eileen)

I wouldn't tell anybody, I wouldn't do anything. If I had my children I'd probably pack everything I have and leave. Because, I turn around and tell somebody or press charges and my kids end up going. What good does that do? (Jo)

Increased Financial Insecurity

Several women spoke of the financial strain that resulted from their involvement with CPS. One participant described the burden of having to pay for public transit so she could attend the numerous appointments that CPS ordered, noting that she was not reimbursed for her costs. Other participants mentioned not being able to work full-time or having to take time off in order to attend the many mandated programs. One woman noted that her partner had to take a significant amount of time off from his job to attend domestic violence counselling, financially straining them to the point where they could not make their monthly rent.

He [partner] was taking every Tuesday off so we even started losing money. We were at the point where we had to talk to our landlord... (Sarah)

Feeling Blamed and Judged for the Abuse

All but three women disclosed that they felt blamed and judged by their worker. In particular, the mothers emphasized that they were blamed for the abuse to which their children were exposed. For example, when the police and CPS officials apprehended her children, May was blamed for continuing to see her ex-partner. She had secretly moved so that her partner would not know where she lived, however, he eventually found her and came to her new house while she was meeting with her CPS worker. According to May, upon apprehension, *“They said my attitude wasn’t for my kids.”*

Christine also felt blamed and judged for the violence between her and her partner. *She just turned to me and [said], ‘How can you act this way in front of your son?’* When Stacey called CPS for assistance to deal with the volatile environment in her home, she was told by the worker, *‘You can not be subjecting your children to this sort of environment!’*

CPS Held Women Accountable for their Partners’ Violent Actions

Four participants believed that CPS had held them accountable for their partners’ violent actions.

I’m the one that’s being punished. Me and my kids are being punished for another person’s actions. (May)

Their [child protection officials] words were [that] I couldn't protect my children. (May)

They [child protection officials] put on the apprehension [order] 'failure to protect your children from witnessing domestic violence'. (Dawn)

Four women doubted that CPS had had any involvement with their former partners. One participant noted that her ex-partner had needed to attend the supervised visits with her son, but since her son's apprehension, she does not believe that her ex-partner has had any further contact with CPS. It is important to note that all three participants' partners are the biological fathers.

Detrimental Impact on the Mothers' Physical and Emotional Health

The participants spoke of the toll that their involvement with CPS had on their physical and emotional health, including experiencing increased stress, headaches, depression, and suicidal thoughts.

I've been to the doctor because I started getting headaches and nosebleeds... My head's always feeling tight and I'm always taking medicine for headaches. (Sarah)

It's been brutal. Very lonely, I've been depressed, just that first month that they were taken I didn't even do anything. I would come home from work, lay on the couch and that would be it. [teary]...I didn't eat, I didn't bother to fix myself up, eat, clean the house, like, signs of depression. (May)

Several women reported using prescription drugs and alcohol to manage their emotional pain. Many spoke of feeling overwhelmed with what they perceived as an endless list of conditions that they had to fulfill to meet their workers' expectations. Even those mothers whose children were not removed expressed the intense stress of CPS involvement and an impact on their emotional and physical health.

Because of what they're [CPS] making me do. I, I just don't know how to hang on anymore... I almost tried to commit suicide. I'm afraid that anything I say, anything I do will get them apprehended. (Eileen)

The Impact of Child Welfare Involvement on the Children

All but three participants spoke of the negative impact of CPS on their children, most notably on those who were apprehended. As mentioned earlier, eight women reported that CPS removed their children, for a total of 20 apprehended children. The women described the negative impact that apprehension had on their children. Many commented about how unhappy their children were living away from their family.

It's horrible. Little bit by little bit, every visit, [six-year old daughter] becomes more and more withdrawn and becomes more and more stressed... It's hard because although we're so excited that we get to see her, it's horrible because we know the visit is going to be over in three hours and [daughter's] going to cry and hide in her room and hide in her closet, hide in the hedge outside because she doesn't want to go back. (Joyce)

The women also spoke of losing the bond with their children, especially infants who were removed from their care. Four participants were concerned that their infants did not know who they were when they came for supervised visits, believing that separation would permanently impact their infants' ability to form a strong attachment with them.

The first time I saw her [infant daughter] she didn't even know who I was. She cried, she screamed, she looked at me like I was some kind of freak... I couldn't hold her... I started bawling. She doesn't even know who I am... I can't look at her. I lost that whole bond. It felt like I was babysitting someone else's baby for the first time. (Sarah)

How do you bond with your child? How do you bond with your baby when he is not there? [crying]. (Dawn)

Three mothers stopped breastfeeding because of CPS involvement. Two participants stopped because their children were apprehended, making it no longer possible to breastfeed, while another stopped because she felt uncomfortable nursing her child in front of CPS staff.

I didn't feel right breastfeeding him in front of somebody I didn't know. So I'd give him a bottle. (Christine)

Five mothers mentioned that their children had been placed in out-of-town foster homes due to a lack of available homes in the city. All five

noted that their children were split up, likely because they could not find a foster placement that could accommodate all of their children.

My kids are out of town, they are not even in [city]... My family has no access to them. (Dawn)

Three mothers described how, since their children were apprehended, they had poorer school performance, including failing grades and withdrawn behaviour in the classroom. The women attributed this to their children having been moved to a different school closer to the foster home.

They [children] were always good in school, though [son] now isn't, like he failed. When they [CPS] took him in March they changed schools... He has to make new friends all over again... I know it has [taken] a toll on them. (May)

One mother was deeply concerned about her daughter's physical safety, alleging that she was touched sexually at the foster home by another foster child.

...the foster home they had placed [six-year old daughter] in, had another child who had fetal alcohol syndrome [and] was teaching [daughter] how to masturbate. (Joyce)

Discussion

Thirteen women participated in qualitative interviews to determine their experiences and perceptions of CPS policies that attempt to address intimate partner violence. Most concerning is that two of the women had *not* experienced intimate partner violence themselves but CPS still considered them to be responsible or culpable for the violence and for their children's well-being. As a reminder, Sarah had not been assaulted by her partner; instead she was brought to the attention of CPS because of the physical altercation between her mother and her fiancé. Likewise, Brittany came to the attention of CPS because of the violence her children had witnessed between their babysitter and the babysitter's boyfriend. She noted that her ex-partner was verbally abusive towards her but CPS had never identified it as a concern. Despite the two participants' lack of involvement in the incidents that precipitated CPS intervention, their homes were still deemed to be dangerous to their children, and they were

ultimately held responsible. In fact, Brittany's children were apprehended subsequent to the incident.

More than half of the women had their children removed because of their children's exposure to violence, either as a primary or secondary concern. Only one of these women was involved with CPS because of alleged direct child abuse. Nevertheless, the participants' children were still apprehended and they still had to have their visits supervised; almost all of the participants had to complete lengthy parenting assessments and were mandated to receive in-home support. If not for children's exposure to intimate partner violence now being deemed a form of child maltreatment, it is doubtful that these women would have ever come to the attention of CPS officials.

Additionally, the majority of the women indicated that, despite intimate partner violence being a concern for CPS, they and their children received little, if any, assistance or support from CPS to deal with intimate partner violence. Ironically, several of the women who reported very serious forms of intimate partner violence reported receiving no assistance at all from CPS. Moreover, one mother who indicated that her daughter was demonstrating serious behavioural problems, which she attributed to her witnessing severe violence, had not received any assistance from CPS despite her numerous requests.

In the current study, all of the women with CPS involvement reported negative experiences. Many of the women who were abused by their partners or former partners felt revictimized by CPS. Women felt blamed by CPS for the violent actions of others and were held ultimately accountable. Women's accountability for their partners' violent behaviour as an attempt to keep children safe has been well documented in the literature (Farmer & Owen, 1995; Humphreys, 1999; Nixon, 2002). Additionally, the women were the primary focus of CPS intervention despite the fact that not one of them was charged with actually abusing their children.

Moreover, the women noted that their parenting was scrutinized, quickly becoming the defining problem, around which almost all of the CPS intervention centred. This occurred despite intimate partner violence being one of the main reasons for initial CPS involvement – not a lack of parenting skills. The assumption that the participants are or will be inadequate parents was evident in the services that they received from CPS: Almost all were required to undergo a parenting assessment and were given in-home support services to “help” them meet their mothering responsibilities. As mentioned earlier, this was despite the fact that not one of them was charged with directly abusing their children.

A growing body of literature casts serious doubts on the prevailing assumption held by CPS that abused mothers are helpless, inadequate and incompetent parents (Letourneau, Fedick, Willms, 2007; Sullivan, Nguyen, Allen, Bybee, & Juras, 2000). On the contrary, abused mothers have found to be protective and emotionally available to their children (Sullivan, et al. 2000). CPS should not necessarily assume that the experience of being a victim of intimate partner violence diminishes a mothers' parenting capacity. Instead, CPS should comprehensively assess the services that women need on a case-by-case basis, which may or may not involve parenting interventions (Casanueva, Martin, Runyan, Barth, & Bradley, in press).

The mothers in the current study were also traumatized by the removal of their children, which resulted in feelings of overwhelming grief and loss, including the loss of their mothering identity. As mentioned earlier, all but one of the participants were not involved with CPS because of direct child abuse; nonetheless, they were still deemed to be unsafe towards their children and experienced intrusive, harsh, and punitive CPS intervention.

Given the serious negative experiences that women had with CPS, especially the profound feeling of grief and loss, it is not surprising that the women reported numerous ill-health effects. Even the women whose children were not apprehended experienced negative health effects because of their involvement with CPS. For women who are experiencing current abuse or who are trying to heal from past abuse, such ill-health effects will only exacerbate women's stress, which *may* further compromise their ability to keep themselves and their children safe. Clearly, this is not in the best interests of abused mothers and their children.

The participants were also placed at greater risk of re-assault because of their CPS involvement. One participant was physically assaulted by her abusive partner physically after CPS apprehended their children, and another woman was fearful of her partner when the police came to the house and removed her children. According to both women, neither the police nor CPS provided any protection from the partners after their children's apprehension – a time that is most likely to be very unsafe for women as their partners may blame them for their children's apprehension. Other women continued to have contact with their abusive partners, with some believing that because of CPS intervention they had no choice but to remain in contact with their abusive partners (i.e., to meet their financial and emotional needs).

Likely the most concerning negative result of CPS policies that address intimate partner violence is the deterrence of women from

seeking protection from police or emergency shelters. Several women reported that they would no longer seek assistance from police or shelter because they were afraid of the impact that CPS would have on their family, most notably the apprehension of their children. If abused women believe that their children may be apprehended when they disclose their own victimization, this could result in women not accessing critical services, including the police and emergency crisis shelters. Leaving can be a lengthy journey, with many returning to their abusive partner several times before they separate permanently (Dobash, Dobash, Cavanagh, & Lewis, 2000). If abused women believe that they cannot seek assistance from shelters or the police without being investigated by CPS, their journey to safety will be inextricably compromised or destroyed. Surely, this cannot be the intent of policymakers when they chose to create policies aimed at addressing intimate partner violence. If the intent was to protect abused women and children, such policies may be seriously problematic.

Child protection policies aimed at protecting children from the potentially harmful impact of exposure to intimate partner violence may not be in the best interest of children after all. In the present study, many women perceived CPS to be damaging to their children, especially those whom were removed from their mothers' care. Although some children were removed from homes where incidences of violence occurred (or alleged to have occurred), many suffered serious negative consequences as reported by their mothers, including being removed from their primary caregiver, placed in out-of-city foster homes, separated from their siblings and other family members, and placed into unfamiliar schools and neighbourhoods. Women reported that their children suffered several significant negative effects, including a loss of bonding or attachment to their mothers; being introduced to sexually inappropriate behaviour while in foster care; increased feelings of fear, anxiety, and sadness; poorer school performance; and weight loss.

Children who witness violence against their mothers are already victimized by fear and struggle with feelings of anger, grief, anxiety, and responsibility for the abuse. Removing them from their mothers may re-victimize them, compounding their distress by increasing fears of abandonment and exacerbating adjustment difficulties (Armitage, 1993). Therefore, it appears that children may not be better off if exposure to intimate partner violence is considered to be a form of maltreatment and they are removed from their primary caregiver.

Serious unintended consequences may result from CPS policies that attempt to address intimate partner violence, especially those that do not prioritize women's safety and well-being. The results from the

aforementioned study, suggests that CPS policies developed to address intimate partner violence may have serious negative repercussions for both abused women and their children.

Limitations and Strengths

The present study is limited on several grounds. First, the participants were recruited through two women's shelters and a local women's centre. These women may not be representative of other abused mothers involved with CPS. Second, the participants are racially homogenous – all but two women are Caucasian (two Aboriginal women), suggesting that the experiences of these participants may not be representative of racially diverse women involved with CPS. Finally, I did not confirm the participants' stories with CPS (either through a case file review or speaking with caseworkers); therefore, the veracity of these women's accounts cannot be determined. However, this was not the objective of the study, but instead, to provide an opportunity for women's voices to be heard and for them to become part of the current dialogue that is taking place around the issue of CPS and intimate partner violence.

Although this study has some limitations, its strengths are worth noting. One strength of the study is undoubtedly the women's voices. The women provided compelling accounts of their experiences with CPS in Alberta. The women confirmed much of what has been already noted in the literature on the CPS response to intimate partner violence; however, they did provide additional knowledge, especially relating to their loss of mothering identity after CPS apprehended their children. This was a surprising finding, worthy of further investigation.

Conclusion

The experiences and perspectives of abused women are critical if we are to understand the effects of CPS policy regarding intimate partner woman abuse in a meaningful way. The intent of the present study was to examine the potential impact that these policies have on abused mothers and their children. Almost all of the 13 participants reported negative experiences with CPS. Many considered their involvement to be physically and emotionally harmful to both themselves and their children.

The CPS interventions mostly involved providing parenting assistance, as opposed to assisting women with their experiences of intimate partner violence. The focus on women's parenting is not helpful at best, and dangerous (or perhaps lethal) at worst. Instead, CPS services should concentrate on helping women cope with violence and its effects

on their physical, emotional, and economic well-being; as well as the protection of mothers and their children (Casanueva, et al., in press). Instead of protecting women and children, CPS policies may have the long-term effect of putting more women and children at risk of harm of intimate partner violence.

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