

Wife Battering or Domestic Violence? A Genealogy of Intimate Partner Violence Policy in Canada

Bethany Shymko- Department of Political Science

Supervised by Dr. Justin Leifso



This project was supported by the
Jamie Cassels Undergraduate
Research Award

March 20th, 2025

Introduction

Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)

This project defines IPV as a patriarchal relationship dynamic between intimate partners that is characterized by power imbalance where one partner exerts coercive control through initiating violence, which escalates in frequency and intensity and is experienced as ongoing physical emotional, psychological, and/or financial harm by the victim.

Why this term

IPV is the most accurate and widely known term to describe the dynamic I want to study. Some scholars may criticize the use of this term because it is gender-neutral and use the term 'wife abuse' instead. While I acknowledge that in Canada, 80% of IPV victims are women and girls, I believe terms that attribute victimhood solely to women in marriages obscure other victims and the underlying power imbalances that pervade all IPV dynamics.

Subjectivities of IPV

The subjectivities of IPV refer to the social construction of victims and perpetrators.

Research Questions

1. How has IPV been governed in Canada?
2. How has IPV policy shaped the subjectivities of perpetrators and victims ?

Acknowledgments

This project would not have been possible without the outpouring of support I received. I would like to thank my honours cohort, fellow JCURA scholars, my incredible supervisor Dr. Leifso, and of course my mom.

Methods and Approaches

Governmentality

Governmentality is a theory and an approach to understanding how policy is shaped by the context and discourse surrounding it. Instead of focusing on the state, governmentality uncovers how power is translated through social relations. To employ a governmentality lens, this project problematizes historical and contemporary IPV policy to destabilize current assumptions about the subjectivities of victims and perpetrators of IPV. These policies are then discussed through the creation of a genealogy which disrupts progressive narratives of history and instead interrogates the "processes, and procedures...by which truth and knowledge are produced"(Tamboukou 1999, 6).

Primary and Secondary Source Analysis

I drew on government transcripts and secondary sources to create the genealogy of IPV policy. The government transcripts included policy documents and verbatim transcripts from debates in the House of Commons. Secondary sources included the scholarly work of other academics, such as peer-reviewed journal articles.

Governance of IPV: 1820-1930

Temperance

Temperance legislation conceptualized IPV as a disruption to the moral and economic function of the conjugal family. Alcohol consumption was understood to be a male vice and was responsible for men's violence towards their wives. As men in heterosexual marriages were considered to be the perpetrators of IPV, women were understood to be the only victims. IPV was understood as an issue because it hindered married people's ability to adhere to the prescribed gender roles of congenial marriages.

Seduction laws

If a man coerced a woman into sexual acts under the pretense of eventual marriage, the woman's father could sue her seducer for "financial loss when an engagement to marry was not fulfilled"(Barclay 2015, 268-269). Though women were recognized as the victims of seduction, the harm they incurred was not understood to be the problem of seduction. The emotional and physical harm women experienced as a result of seduction was a means to the true toll of seduction: disruptions to nuclear family life. Though men were understood to be the perpetrators of seduction, their actions were not considered deviant but normal male behaviour.

1970-Present

Criminalization

A strong criminal justice response to IPV obscures the true causes of these dynamics. IPV is reduced to episodic violent altercations between partners. Criminality is understood to be the root cause of IPV, and criminals are the perpetrators of this crime.

Medicalization

Governing IPV through medicalization obscures the actions of perpetrators. Medicalizing IPV creates strict perimeters for victimhood and places all the attention of IPV onto the victim. For example, the term 'battered women' pathologizes women's experience and resistance to IPV.

Familialization

Refamilialization, a term coined by the scholar Janine Brodie, refers to the state's attempt to reinvigorate the importance of nuclear family unit in Canadian society. Terms like family and domestic violence are used instead of other labels like 'wife abuse,' which obscures the primary victims of IPV. Violent dynamics between intimate partners are no longer the focal point of governing IPV, and child and elder abuse takes precedence. Perpetrators are vague as the issues encompassed under family violence are widespread.

Conclusion

This project demonstrates that the Canadian government's policy responses to IPV do not accurately reflect the subjectivities and realities of IPV. Instead, the government has used policy to construct victims and perpetrators of IPV into subjectivities that can be governed without addressing the patriarchal power imbalances that persist throughout Candian social and domestic life.

References

- Backhouse, Constance. *Petticoats and Prejudice : Women and Law in Nineteenth Century Canada*. Toronto: Canadian Scholars, 2015.
- Barclay, Katie. "Emotions, the Law and the Press in Britain: Seduction and Breach of Promise Suits, 1780-1830." *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 39, no. 2 (June 4, 2015): 267-84. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1754-0208.12330>.
- Government of Canada. "Fact Sheet: Intimate Partner Violence." www.canada.ca, March 20, 2024. <https://www.canada.ca/en/women-gender-equality/gender-based-violence/intimate-partner-violence.html>.
- Brodie, Janine. "Canadian Women, Changing State Forms, and Public Policy." In *Women and Canadian Public Policy*, edited by Janine Brodie. Harcourt, Brace Canada, 1996.
- Nason-Clark, Nancy, Barbra Fisher-Townsend, Steve McMullin, and Catherine Holtmann. "Family Violence in Canada." In *Family Violence from a Global Perspective : A Strengths-Based Approach*, edited by Sylvia Asay, John DeFrain, Marcee Metzger, and Robert Moyer. SAGE Publications, 2013.
- Tamboukou, Maria. 1999. "Writing Genealogies: An Exploration of Foucault's Strategies for Doing Research." *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 20 (2): 201-17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0159630990200202>.