

## **DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND THE NEWSPRINT MEDIA**

**DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND THE NEWSPRINT MEDIA:**

**A Critical Discourse Analysis of Three Canadian Newspapers in a Covid-19 Context**

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

I would like to take this opportunity to thank my supervisor Dr. Saara Greene for her continued support, reassurance, and guidance during the process of creating this thesis. Your immeasurable knowledge and insight have encouraged me to remain critical and wholeheartedly explore my interests and passions.

A special thanks to my family and friends for their unwavering encouragement and support for every endeavour I pursue and for grounding me when I am faced with feelings of self-doubt. Your continued support has shown me that this is truly only the beginning of what I am capable of.

A final thanks to the men I have either encountered as strangers or known and trusted who have provided me with the experiences from which I write. Your actions do not define me but have ignited a passion for justice and healing. I wish you all peace and I forgive you.

This is dedicated to all the strong, brave, and resilient women affected by domestic and gender-based violence in its multitude of forms. I see you, I hear you, I believe you.

**Abstract:**

This paper seeks to explore the way the print news media reported on issues related to domestic violence (DV) in the Greater Toronto/Hamilton Ontario area in the context of Covid-19 from March 2020 to March 2021. Specifically, I drew on three newspapers to include the Hamilton Spectator, the Toronto Star, and the Globe and Mail. This research is primarily concerned with the discourses that emerged about gender-based violence in the newsprint media during a time when people were required to stay in their homes and when access to community-based services that support women experiencing DV became increasingly challenging. Using a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) that was grounded in a feminist theoretical framework, three themes emerged as particularly dominant. These included: a) the media’s use of “victim” and “survivor” discourses, b) women’s experiences of DV and access to resources, and c) public health discourses that centered on responses to DV in light of Covid-19. This paper concluded that reinforcement of dominant narratives about the socio-political and gendered landscape in which DV is reported on via newsprint media sources, depict DV as an individual rather than structural issue that shifts the blame away from historical and current day social, economic, and political forces that create the conditions in which DV occurs. Importantly, the newsprint media promote a homogenous definition of ‘woman’ thus elevating dominant DV discourses that tend to centre the experiences of white, heterosexual women and that result in silencing the voices of gender diverse and racialized women. Consequently, my research suggests that there is an ongoing need to build on existing feminist literature to critically examine DV as a systemic issue that requires a response that is inclusive of the diversity of women who experience DV, the needs for services to support a diversity of women, and to do so in ways that move away from individual solutions toward shifts in practice and policy.

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## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 Background:**

I came to this research with a deep commitment to supporting “survivors” of DV. Although there is a plethora of research on experiences of DV, the social and political conditions that enable DV to continue, and social, political and legal responses to DV, our knowledge of the role of print media has in illuminating these issues is lesser known. I am particularly interested in the way the print media highlighted or characterized DV in the context of the pandemic given the increased isolation and decreased privacy that circulated in the lives of people experiencing DV as a result of action taken to control the spread of the Covid-19 virus.

### **1.2 Domestic Violence Defined:**

DV is a prominent social issue, and one that primarily affects women. The Canadian Women’s foundation (2022) stated that more than 40% of women experience DV in their lifetime. Andrus (2021) urges that DV is “an intractable social problem that must be understood in order to be eradicated” (pp. i-ii). This recognizes the need to understand the vastness of DV in order to be cognizant of physical, emotional, sexual, financial, and verbal mistreatment among others, as well as the broader ways in which societal structures and systems uphold unequal power distribution that further disadvantage women (Andrus, 2021). A comprehensive understanding of DV as a social issue aids in the creation of more holistic ways to combat the variety of experiences of DV. Similarly, Barchielli et al. (2022) define DV as a public health issue involving coercion, controlling/threatening behaviour, sexual violence and more. These definitions highlight the complexity of DV and the myriad of ways in which DV is experienced by women. These definitions also reflect DV as a societal and cultural issue that requires

interception at the root issues associated with these experiences such as stereotypes, gender norms, and both policy and structural changes to create more equity. Calling attention to it as a social issue promotes social responses including reimagining the resources and policies that affect/support those experiencing DV, to the social understanding of DV, gender, and power that provide opportunities to challenge the discourse that Western society is comfortable with using and to interrupt these cycles of continuation.

My research is most closely aligned with scholars and activists who view DV as a social problem that disproportionately affects women and women-identifying individuals, and that argue that violence against women is learned and reproduced in society in a variety of ways including reinforced gender norms and structural inequalities. Hence, I refer to DV throughout this paper as the targeted and systematic violence, or otherwise mistreatment, directed towards a second party/individual in attempt to manipulate/control them as to reinforce power and domination of the first party/individual (Faramarzi et al., 2005). DV can be physical, mental, emotional mistreatment or otherwise. In addition, my understanding of DV is that it is a systemic issue that is supported by and reinforced by dominant narratives that promote power differences.

### **1.3 Domestic Violence and Covid-19:**

Scholars such as McHugh (1989) and Seymour et al (2021) argue that gender norms and stereotypes that continue to promote male domination and control over female partners is a primary contributor to the conditions in which DV occurs. Covid-19 has also exacerbated pre-existing struggles of DV services and created an opening where resources are able to advocate for greater systemic changes to be implemented both in terms of how DV resources are funded and operationalized, to large-scale systemic changes that will tackle root issues regarding female subordination, power imbalances both in terms of micro interactions and power imbalances

between women and macro societal structures that they interact with. Covid-19 has interrupted and complicated the lives of individuals on a global scale. Between canceling events/closing facilities relied upon for entertainment, reducing childcare options, and laying off workers/altering work duties, many have had to make sacrifices and difficult decisions in regard to maintaining their own health and safety and the health and safety of those around them. However, Covid-19 has had much more drastic impacts on those dealing with the same aforementioned issues, in addition to the fear of a partner participating in DV against them. DV cases have been rising steadily since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. Research shows that violence in Ontario has risen by 20-30% (Illingworth & Ferarra, 2020). Covid-19 and the associated efforts to control the transmission of the virus have resulted in the creation of further opportunities for DV acts to occur in secrecy, allowing partners enacting violence to maintain and intensify pre-existing behaviours of violence and mistreatment. Public health mandates to stay home, lockdowns, and mass work lay-offs have created more opportunities of isolation and more opportunities for perpetrators to take advantage of the circumstances to further abusive tactics due to closure of public spaces, orders to remain at home, and loss of jobs. These factors limit the people who have contact with those affected by DV which works to reduce the number of people who are able to recognize signs of DV and intervene to stop it. Furthermore, the conditions allow perpetrators to utilize isolation more easily, which is a common tactic that perpetrators use that cut off social networks and reinforce reliance on the perpetrator. While Covid-19 does not cause DV, it has provided those with pre-existing motivations to enact violence, more opportunities to do so.

The decision to pursue DV in relation to the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic was guided by a curiosity concerning the increased newspaper media reports detailing numerous cases of DV



occurring, and even spiking during lockdowns (Barchielli et al., 2021). This curiosity thereby prompted me to question when and how newspaper media in my own community (Hamilton/Toronto area) began reporting on DV, in addition to the focus of these reports. As I began research, I became further interested in how the newsprint media reported, if at all, on the service needs of women experiencing DV during a public health crisis. I was drawn toward examining newspapers because newspapers reflect not only what is going on (the reporting of DV occurring) but have the potential through reporting to uphold and/or challenge of current discourses and social understandings of DV (Teo, 2000). By interrogating the language used by newspaper media sources, my research can provide an understanding of how the newspaper media contributes to dominant discourses about DV. These factors have guided me to explore my emerging curiosity around how DV was covered by the newsprint media during Covid-19 lockdown in Ontario, Canada and the implications this has on developing responses to DV.

## **CHAPTER 2: AN OVERVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

### **2.1 Overview:**

Domestic violence (DV) has been framed by the literature as an act that occurs from a male perpetrator onto a female partner, crafting it as a Western, heteronormative issue concerning power imbalance. Though DV is recognized to be a global issue, in Canada the conditions for violence to occur and be maintained are both often ignored or effectively addressed. To critically assess the dominant narratives that emerge from print media texts relating to DV during the lockdown period of Covid-19, I engaged in a literature review of the current scholarship and debates on and about DV.

### **2.2 Feminist Perspectives of Domestic Violence, Power, and Oppression:**

Feminists have discussed DV as a social issue that predominantly affects women and is the result of men’s oppression of women which aids in increased male power and superiority. Feminists also recognize the implications that experiences of DV have on women in the capacity of economic security, gender norms, and the family structure. These factors are recognized to be limiting to women, hence the feminist agenda to liberate women and challenge these notions that bind women to a predetermined capacity achieved through public means such as policy changes, challenging social norms, practice changes, among others. In the specific case of social work, Davis and Hagen (1992) argue the importance of taking the notoriously “private” issue of women’s DV experiences and framing the solutions within larger sociopolitical contexts to bring the social environment into discussion and shift the blame away from individuals experiencing DV. This proposes an agenda that addresses changes to the social reality in which DV is embedded. It is further observed that changes in political climate (such as shifts to more

conservative ideologies) have resulted in the attitudes and beliefs of policymakers being influenced by these emerging ideologies and thus moving away from concerns that would prioritize finding social solutions to DV (Davis & Hagen, 1992). As a result, it is crucial to be cognizant of the contemporary social environment and the interests that those in power are serving. Social workers are thereby implicated in continuing to be competent of said political conditions and pushing to keep DV interests at the forefront and continue to fight for the recognition of addressing it as a social issue as opposed to an individual one.

Economic inequality has long been a focus for feminists who point to systemic structures that result in a precarious labour force that is dominated by women. In the context of the Western world, MacGregor et al. (2022b) posit that women are primarily associated with the role of childcare, and further state that women are trapped in lower-paying precarious work to fit the needs of childcare schedules and in relation to DV, voice that the concern for childcare often affects their ability to work as they experience fear with leaving children in the care of partners enacting violence upon them. Feminist scholars further recognize that these are long-standing inequalities that are not caused by the pandemic, but have rather been exacerbated by it. The wage gap and women in precarious work is not a new concept that feminist scholars are concerned with, but it is one that they have constructed arguments for in relation to how it has created further challenges and injustices for women in light of the pandemic. More specifically, in relation to DV, scholars have highlighted how women have been targeted by pandemic control measures that have compromised their safety and ability to get out of DV relationships.

McPhail et al. (2007) discussed the feminist understanding of DV as a patriarchal issue that involves predominantly men executing oppression towards predominantly women (as cited by Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Walker, 1979). McPhail et al. (2007) further argued that

contemporary feminist views have evolved to encompass associations of past and present power relations that use control to subordinate women. Feminist literature seeks to bring the notoriously “private” matter into the community or “public” realm by requesting adequate programs for women affected by DV, treatment systems for the male perpetrators of DV, women’s involvement in the criminal justice system, and further policy level interventions (McPhail et al., 2007). McPhail et al (2007) also proposed an important ideal that challenged the dominant discourses of DV cases that frame men exclusively as perpetrators and women as exclusively victims by advocating for individualized treatment and expanding workers’ resource awareness to include the complex and differing needs that individuals affected by DV may need, regardless of gender, race, ability, etc.

Hester (2022) argued that Covid-19 was not a causal factor of DV to begin occurring, but rather the pandemic contributed to creating situations for perpetrators to “intensify” already existing controlling and threatening behaviours via lockdowns and stay-at-home orders. This contributes to the understanding that DV continues to exist based on upholding the power of often male figures, and continuing subordination and oppression of women.

Nikupeteri et al. (2022) discussed using community interventions to address eradicating DV and challenging the social norms of a patriarchal society that disadvantage women. It was further argued that this approach would also aid in the individualization of intervention strategies that focus on individual needs (Nikupeteri et al., 2022). This is pertinent in being able to encompass that DV is experienced regardless of gender, but recognizes the prevalence of female “victims” due to power and control that are interconnected to a patriarchal society. Furthermore, these ideals articulate a need for more complex interventions when considering race, ability, and other compounding oppressions.

Namy et al. (2017) located patriarchal family structures and values as a factor that increased women’s subordination in the nuclear family which positioned men as head of the household and supported conditions for violence and mistreatment to occur. Namy et al. (2017) further demonstrated the cyclical pattern of DV during their study that explored the co-existence of violence against women and violence against children in the same home. They demonstrated that growing up witnessing DV enacted on a family member normalized the occurrence of violence and perpetuated the cycle down the line (Namy et al., 2017).

Feminist scholars framed arguments that root DV in cyclical power domination and continued subordination of women which is employed as an anchor to explain the occurrence of DV. The literature expressed that DV is not *caused* by any one incident or government order, but rather a complex constellation of power, control, and oppression that have been occurring long before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, that have resulted in easier means for DV to occur and remain hidden. These conversations regarding power and control as means for DV to be able to flourish are central in being able to adequately address root issues relating to experiences of DV. The overall literature also seeks to challenge dominant narratives that frame DV exclusively as men enacting violence against a female partner and creating a more holistic, and individualized plan to address any occurrence of violence between partners regardless of gender, race, ability, or otherwise. Feminist scholars, like the aforementioned, have worked to pull DV out of the shadows of the private sphere of the home and frame it as a intricate social issue that is attached to systems, structures, and social norms that reinforce male power and dominance in a myriad of ways.

Seymour et al. (2021) argue that men typically perpetrate violence against women with little awareness about the intrinsic power differences between men and women in contemporary

Western society. Rai et al., (2022) further offered that DV disproportionately affects women as a result of gender inequity and the associated power between them (as cited by Barnish, 2004).

Scholars used discourses of power in a way that emphasized how it is employed by male perpetrators as a way to assert dominance and hold power over a female partner. In the context of gender norms, McHugh (1989) further discusses how the upholding of institutions such as family may support or encourage male violence. These notions of power are deeply connected to social norms and institutions that are valued and reproduced by society, yet remain largely unchallenged. As a result, men employ methods of control to ensure that their positions and dominance are not questioned and to remain in alignment with social norms and structures that tell them they should be dominant.

### **2.3 Gender, Race, and Domestic Violence:**

It has been widely argued that traditional feminist discourses on DV did not do enough to centre the voices of racialized women. In response, Alnas-Smilely et al. (2020) adopted an intersectional approach to DV by assessing the additional barriers created when coupled with race that impacts service delivery and the way in which a service user is or is not able to interact with the service.

In particular, black feminism began a movement that recognized inequalities within the feminist movement itself. James (2022) discussed the forgotten voices of women of colour, whose experiences were not reflective of the dominant white narrative the movement idolized. Moreover, James (2022) reiterated that the lack of inclusion of black experiences created an erasure of history and a limited range of discourse available to represent these BIPOC experiences and how they differed from mainstream white experiences.

Discourses used to describe BIPOC women affected by DV often dwelled on experiences of trauma and mistrust, especially toward the medical system. These discourses highlight an intersection that requires complex intervention to address, while also noting that these are exclusive concerns of women in BIPOC bodies, that are often excluded from interventions employed that center the needs of white women. Discourses concerned with access to quality and holistic services, represent the lack of adequate resources available for populations they are intended to serve.

Activist Tarana Burke began a movement in 2006 that focused on the needs of women affected by sexual violence, and in particular, women of colour and their specific constellation of complex needs in recognition of the differing needs compared to white women that were not being met by contemporary services (Phipps, 2019). The movement gained traction in 2017 when #MeToo began trending when it was used by Alyssa Milano following allegations against Harvey Weinstein and the movement has since been criticized of becoming overly whitewashed by the white voices dominating the space (Phipps, 2019). Phipps (2019) further argued the danger of “universalizing” the experiences of gendered violence, due to the misinterpretation of BIPOC experiences when they are presented as an extension of white feminism. Kupupika (2021) further echoed that there has been a longstanding absence of racialized voices in the feminist movement resulting in the default image being that of a white, straight, and privileged woman. When this image becomes the norm, it “others” the experiences of women of colour and leads to individualizing the problem of racism, when in reality, it was the result of an exclusionary movement (Kupupika, 2021).

These contributions have resulted in more a more critical interrogation of feminism and highlighting the differing crucial needs of BIPOC individuals and the erasure of their voices,

experiences, and ideas. This understanding has further resulted in the ability to identify more opportunities to expand resources and responses to BIPOC needs regarding gendered violence and promotes working in collaboration with these communities as opposed to making assumptions on their behalf.

Klingspohn (2018) discusses DV at the specific intersection of Indigenous women in relation to intergenerational trauma, racism, and a pre-existing lack of quality services to meet their complex needs concerning DV. Furthermore, it delves into inadequacies of contemporary services to meet their needs in a plethora of ways including physical location of services being inaccessible due to being located often far away from where Indigenous populations reside (Klingspohn, 2018). Moreover, these DV services are often not compatible with the cultural, spiritual, and emotional needs of Indigenous women (Klingspohn, 2018). The article also referenced the lack of medical services accessed by Indigenous women which was underpinned by mistrust due to historical abuse and mistreatment of them when utilizing these services (Klingspohn, 2018). It also reflects the important cultural differences of Indigenous women compared to the feminist framework in which DV services are currently located which focus on building self sufficiency for women to leave abusive partners, which subsequently excludes the cultural values of Indigenous women who value marrying for life and not leaving partners (Klingspohn, 2018). This service thereby demonstrates incompatible goals with the needs of Indigenous service users. Koshan et al., (2020) further discussed the cultural inaccessibility of Indigenous, immigrant women and other women of colour due to DV resources not being equipped to deal with the differing cultural needs and beliefs. Though Klingspohn (2018) was written prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, there is a clear message being echoed both pre and post pandemic, identifying a long-standing, identified issue with service that has, and continues to be,



inadequately addressed. With the furthered complications of increased DV rates from the pandemic, coupled with the other multifaceted hardships faced by the Indigenous population, including racism, social exclusion, and stigma, services have been ill-fitting and resistant to adaptation for a long time, demonstrating how the services are no more helpful for the more complex needs that have arisen from the onset of the pandemic, compared to the needs that they have sought service for from back before the pandemic.

More recently, there has been more attention on responding to the unique experiences of transgender women who experience DV. Gamarel et al., (2022) discussed that DV resources do not cater to the needs of transgender women as they are often designed for cisgender women, creating a barrier to access, and recognizing an inadequacy of DV resources and further note that transgender women may be denied access to shelters and resources altogether. Murphy et al. (2020) discussed that DV concerning transgender women is an understudied field further noting that DV against transgender women is often grouped together with hate crimes and gender-based violence, which neglects to consider the unique concerns accompanying DV incidents. Misra (2022) noted that Covid-19 worsened discrimination of transgender individuals in healthcare settings and further recognized that LGBTQIA+ individuals experience greater DV. Moreover, Misra (2020) argued that the government is responsible for adapting laws and policies that ensure equal access to health care for everyone. Roure (2020) also argues that crises and natural disasters increase DV and that transgender and LGBTQ+ individuals are at elevated risks and stresses the need for improved housing resources, especially given that LGBTQ+ individuals face more housing difficulties. Discourse used to discuss transwomen and their interaction with services often portrays them as a subcategory of women and a dialogue has been crafted around the unaddressed inadequacies of their needs with services.

## **2.4 Feminist Responses to Domestic Violence:**

Many scholars advocated for policy intervention and systemic changes for tackling root causes of DV. This included reinventing services to encapsulate the needs of all women, including transgender women. Gamarel et al., (2022) argued that contemporary DV resources have accessibility barriers for transgender women as they are often designed with cisgender women in mind. This fails to recognize the differences in terms of needs that transgender women will have compared to cisgender women that are being consistently overlooked by resources and services that are not designed for them. Davis (2022) speaking from their own experience, highlighted a lack of transgender perspectives and representation when it comes to DV and the need for moving away from rigid gender binaries to create inclusive spaces for individuals of all identities. Davis (2022) further relied on these experiences to further promote key contributions to queer feminist theory and its work including acknowledging the existence of transgender identities, validating gender identities of transgender individuals, and understanding the complex experiences of transgender individuals that are often misrepresented/underrepresented in literature. In the specific context of transgender women, one of the ways their DV experiences differ from that of cisgender women is the ways in which partners exert control. For example, “outing” a partner as transgender, or intentionally using the wrong pronouns are used to belittle, insult, and hurt transgender individuals, which are methods that are not employed against cisgender women (Davis, 2022). As a result, there is an overt need to recognize the different barriers facing transgender women and other queer identities and work to address these needs with specific services and interventions that will differ from the default cisgender woman’s service needs as these experiences further represent the damage/inefficacy of a “one size fits all” approach to DV resources and supports.

Greater shelter capacities and funding to shelters, hotlines, and other DV resources was also proposed as a solution to combating DV. Crisan (2020) highlights that shelters are working against a housing crisis which prevents discharging clients and accepting new ones. Women are also affected by greater labour precarity and lower income levels, increasing their challenges in obtaining affordable homes independently (Chiaramonte et al., 2021). Moffitt et al. (2020) also note that many DV resources are underfunded and rely on fundraising to remain operational.

Including more women in positions of power and policy has also been proposed in order to effectively meet the needs of all women instead of having policies made and enacted on their behalf by men, who ultimately do not understand these issues in a similar manner (Andrus, 2021). Roure (2020) further noted that LGBTQ+ individuals need to be involved in policy making as well in recognition of their differing needs compared to cisgender individuals. Promoting women, including transgender women, advancing to positions in government and policy making would provide greater perspectives in how these policy enactments will affect individuals and assist in positive changes that mitigate barriers to resources. Brown (2013) used an American example from Maryland to highlight both the changes that including the perspectives of women legislators can have on the outcomes of DV policies that could not be understood in the same capacity by male counterparts, but also highlighted the difference in views that black women had in combining race and gender that both their male and white counterparts did not understand. These perspectives brought forth policy enactments that addressed the intersection of racism and gender-based violence that was not understood by, and therefore overlooked by the other members who did not experience the same intersectionality. These worked to address and promote the benefits and necessity of having diverse members

involved in policy and legislation as to meet the needs of the most individuals and groups possible and to avoid homogenizing the experiences and needs of those affected by DV.

## **2.5 Domestic Violence at the Interface of Covid-19:**

Moffitt et al., (2020) presented women’s fear of losing themselves and their dignity coupled with financial, social, and other personal factors as reasons that in the height of the pandemic many women were forced to stay with their partners who enacted violence upon them. McHugh (1989) further argues that men use control methods as a way to maintain power over women which is a fundamental principle of DV.

Many scholars used discourse surrounding inaccessibility and longstanding inadequacies of DV resources, highlighting problematic operations prior to the pandemic. Leigh et al. (2022) noted a confusion around resources that were available and operational in the height of the stay-at-home orders. Likewise, Moffitt et al., (2020) echoed a confusion surrounding available resources, and noted an overall lack of resource availability. Rai et al., (2022) noted that many took to twitter to utilize the advantages of social media to advertise shelters and services that those experiencing DV could access. Piquero et al., (2021) further offered that resources and services need to be redirected to marginalized groups that are disproportionately affected by the pandemic like older women, women of colour, and those with mental/chronic health conditions. Wood et al., (2022) also discusses services in the context of them struggling to keep up with the increased demand in service due to increased levels of DV experienced from stay-at-home orders. MacGregor et al., (2022a) point to a need for flexibility in violence against women services, citing in-person options as best when they are available. Wathen et al., (2022) further notes that a lack of collaboration with violence against women services has resulted in a decrease in the efficacy of service delivery. Moreover, Moffitt et al., (2020) noted struggles of service

delivery in remote areas, citing that distance to services can be an issue and that police may only attempt to resolve conflict via phone instead of going out to where issue is occurring, which was discussed as a plausible deterrent for those seeking help (Wathen et al., 2022).

Eghtesadi (2021), Kofman and Garfin (2020), Koshan et al. (2020), and Pentaraki and Speake (2020), all identify the inadequate service that has resulted from violence against women services and shelters shifting to online and virtual means due to the close quarters that those affected by DV were in with their perpetrators who were able to closely monitor them and their technology usage, thus preventing safe access to such services. Koshan et al. (2020) also further this notion by discussing how vulnerable populations often have less overall access to technology and less technology savviness to be able to engage in service and how online services set a baseline assumption for access that does not equally translate to all individuals needing support. Kofman and Garfin (2020) further offer that DV cases since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic might be beyond the scope of offered services warranting more immediate and pressing intervention such as that of the police and the medical field.

Services/resources and their associated awareness is critical to examine as the need and demand for DV services has drastically increased since the onset of the stay-at-home orders implemented as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Without adequate knowledge about operational and accessible resources, many women were left isolated from what may have been the only sources of help/assistance that they knew of. Moreover, an overall lack of services, and capacity issues of available services, helps to highlight a long-standing struggle of the violence against women sector and the pressing urgency to work in collaboration with figures of these services to implement meaningful changes that will address the issues that they have been highlighting (Quinlan & Singh, 2020). The discourses brought forth by these scholars

highlighted a clear outcry for several gaps in DV resources. This included a prior lack of services, capacity issues, and intersectional approaches.

Overall, scholars also advocated for greater societal changes that would work to diminish gender inequality and further work to close the wage gap (Chiaramonte et al., 2021; Quinlan and Singh, 2020). These societal changes would advocate for women to be treated equally in society and reduce the reliance upon partners for shelter and affording necessities. Moreover, these actions would promote women’s independence and provide them with the ability to leave DV relationships. Andrus (2022) noted that control increases stereotypes regarding male and female labour as well as behaviours. Andrus (2022) furthers that this fuels the belief that men should be in control of women, while arguing that DV will never fully be tackled until an adjustment is made to the larger cultural discourses used about women are changed.

## **2.6 Domestic Violence in the Western Media:**

Media has discussed DV to primarily be a heteronormative concern. Barchielli et al. (2022) conducted a similar analysis on newspapers and the emergence of DV concerns in Italy and found that majority of perpetrators of violence were men and female partners were targeted and further noted that DV incidents increased during the lockdown periods where partners were forced to stay home together. Ali and Khalid (2021) also interrogated newspaper media and discourses during a Covid-19 timeframe in Pakistan and argued that the outcome of discourses related to women feeling “trapped” and fearful over the control that male partners had over women’s lives, and grievances against the inaction taken to address DV safety on a social level, such as gender equality action, and a lack of government intervention, such as policy enactments and resource modifications/creations.

Gerrits et al. (2021) noted that newsprint media is an important tool in educating the public on social issues and current events, and that in the context of DV, noted that previous studies of the media often played a role in continuing stigma and spreading misinformation. Gerrits et al. (2021) discussed the tone in which media wrote about DV, majority falling into a tone that conveyed sympathy for women affected by DV. They further noted that events and interventions can affect and change the tone the media writes from, citing a case of DV where the male perpetrator in question released a YouTube video declaring his innocence which led to media adopting a more neutral tone when writing about the case (Gerrits et al., 2021).

Russo (2006) echoed the notion that media is pertinent in shaping public views and discourse about social issues but further problematized media’s framing of DV as centering on “victims” (mostly women) and neglecting to talk about perpetrators of violence. Russo (2006) further articulated how media focus on women as “victims” places responsibility of DV onto those experiencing it. Notably Russo (2006) also warned against the media’s tendency to write for the purpose of entertainment and providing a good story to get views and garner popularity.

The discourses proposed by media, particularly newspaper media in regard to DV, convey the urgency of DV as a world wide phenomenon. The interrogation of the aforementioned media studies prompted me to consider if a North American perspective would echo the same needs. These discourses also help to highlight the existing gaps in service delivery as well as treatment of women, which systematically work together to contribute to experiences of DV and how media plays a significant role in educating the public on social issues.

## **2.7 Gaps/Critiques:**

One of the largest gaps uncovered was that scholars seem to identify that pre-Covid services have a long-standing history of insufficiently meeting the needs of women experiencing DV and that the Covid-19 context has merely exacerbated the issue. For example, issues highlighted above detailed how capacity has been an issue for a long time, as further issues like housing act to bottleneck discharge plans which thereby prevent new intakes (Crisan, 2020). This also reinforced my understanding and curiosity around the ways in which the oppression of women has an interconnectedness to many issues. The overall exploration of this literature mapped out how women are linked to job precarity, which is linked to financial dependence on a partner, which creates circumstances where women can not leave due to financial restraint from their occupations, which is linked to shelter capacities and inadequate social welfare systems to support women, which is linked to trouble leaving shelters due to financial restraint from job precarity, all of which are experiences that are further complicated with intersectional approaches of overlapping oppression. These root issues are at the heart of the DV cycle that is recognized and advocated for by scholars, yet there appear to be limited actions taken to improve these concerns. This is critical as this examination encapsulates the need and reliance of larger-scale interventions to listen to the needs of services and their users and use policy and funding to be able to deliver and meet these needs. Furthermore, acknowledging that DV services have been fighting for changes related to the housing crisis and a recognition from a feminist framework that there is further implication based on gendered power differences resulting in less financial security for women, housing concerns, and occupying less positions in policy, all work together to reinforce a longstanding need to address DV at the root of the myriad of social issues it is attached to.



Due to a lack of scholarly literature available on newsprint media in the Hamilton/Toronto area at the intersection of DV and Covid-19, I was enticed to explore the gap that there is a recognition that resources are not only strained and in high demand but also do not meet the intersectional needs of those accessing it. My research seeks to conduct my own media analysis in a Canadian context that explores the resource quality and awareness for all women in relation to DV in a Covid-19 timeframe. This will be accomplished by interrogating how DV emerged as an area of interest to newspaper media in the surrounding area, and how discourses contributed to enacting changes or highlighting changes that are needed to create holistic services and tackle the power and gender inequalities associated with experiences of DV.

## **CHAPTER 3: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: FEMINIST THEORY**

### **3.1 What is Feminist Theory:**

My research is grounded in a feminist theoretical framework. Feminist theory is defined as challenging “male dominance, to contribute to knowledge about women, and to construct a science in which gender and gender relations are seen as fully social and explanatorily important” (Snyder, 1995, pp.91-92). Feminist theory takes a holistic approach to the situation since it is rooted in a historic viewpoint that concerns itself with a long-standing oppression of female experiences and a unanimous silencing of women’s voices and issues (Quinlan & Singh, 2020). This approach offers a broad analysis of the data collected by allowing for multiple forms of understanding to come together regarding the present-day experiences of DV. This framework offers flexibility and an understanding that numerous factors make up the experience of female oppression including power, gender norms, the patriarchy, and discourse. There are multiple feminist theorists that have contributed to my understanding of why and how a feminist grounding in addressing women’s experiences of DV is a critical social science framework for my research. I am most drawn to the scholarship and arguments presented by Devault (1996) and Rezaei (2022) because of their recognition of the importance of power. I am further influenced by the work of bell hooks, Judith Butler, and Kimberly Crenshaw due to their equal concern with power dynamics, but also their attention to intersectionality of factors like race and gender.

DeVault (1996) posits that feminist theory relies heavily on consciousness raising to use the lived experience of women to combat the recognition that female experiences were distorted or ignored in mainstream society. DeVault (1996) also states that looking at the history of women’s treatment and experiences plays a key role in the collective movements pushing to change those very experiences. This helps to narrate the oppression faced by women in contemporary society as well as the associated lack of power that they hold in valued positions.

Rezaei (2022) further discusses the notion of feminism focusing on power and interrogating the hierarchy of power. This main pillar of feminism is intrinsic in understanding female oppression due to lack of power that women hold in society compared to men. I believe that this frame is thereby compelling for the nature of my research because the main values align with the scope of the experiences of DV, I am researching that also cite a wide range of ways power by men is used over their female partners, reiterating dominance of men and subordination of women. By becoming more familiar with feminist methodologies like consciousness raising and power dynamics, better exploration of a broader and more inclusive range of discourse presented in the research may be obtained, leading to more complex revelations relating to the female experience with DV. Moreover, recognizing that both feminism and critical discourse analysis are concerned with power, draws a connection between the two of them that helps them work more effectually with one another.

What these feminist theorists have in common is their attention to power differences, particularly the layered power differences between an oppressed group itself. All of these contributors recognize a socially constructed and reinforced power difference between men and women, but they further those intersections with the recognition that race, age, ability, class, and other social classifications compound to create more complex considerations for experiences of oppression. This provides me with a necessary frame from which to conduct my CDA on print media discourses on DV during Covid-19. By paying particular attention to those considerations, it provided me with a critical consciousness towards the different experiences of DV by a myriad of other groups made up by women. Butler (1999) takes an approach to the heteronormative creation of DV and the binaries of gender which aided my ability in analyzing the newsprint media in relation to how it contributed to this same narrative in the context of DV. Crenshaw

(1989) discussed how race complicates and furthers an oppressive experience by articulating the compounding effects of more than one form of oppression. Particularly in her discussion of gender and race being seen as mutually exclusive categories, she notes a crossroads that is excluded from the societal eye where race and gender are treated like mutually exclusive categories. It was further noted that the most privileged of an oppressed group obscure the claims of said groups (Crenshaw, 1986). hooks (2000) also discussed feminism as encompassing of everyone regardless of their class, gender, or race. The work of hooks (2000) and Crenshaw (1989) are integral pieces to consider how power differs based on overlapping forms of oppression which will also require differing forms of intervention. In my newsprint media analysis this will aid me in being able to assess the discourses informed by media at the specific intersections of race, class, and gender if applicable. It will also shape my understanding and consciousness towards how these groups are covered by the media and the attention to specific interventions that they will need and if that is addressed in the newsprint articles.

### **3.2 Feminist Theory and Challenging Dominant Discourses:**

As Turgeon et al., (2014) suggests, the nature of dominant discourses is widespread and normalized, resulting in these discourses remaining largely unchallenged, often reproducing ways of thinking and behaviours that make invisible other, equally valuable and often challenging discourses. Lafferty et al. (2021) discussed how gender norms are reinforced through parents and the larger society by following and representing the predetermined qualities associated with men and women, and by extension, masculinity and femininity. Feminist theory allows for a degree of articulation in explaining how reinforcing these gender norms create situations for men to take advantage of the power they are allotted and exert control over female bodies, and bars women from similar opportunities of power. Shapiro et al., (2022) discuss the

lack of women in positions of power within organizations and call upon male allyship to help equate the opportunities for advancement. This can be extended to highlight the lack of women involved at policy-making levels and the feminist argument that this thereby results in a lack of female perspective over policies and operations pertaining to primarily female experiences and hardships (Haque & Yamin, 2020). As a result, legislation and action pertaining to female hardships and needs are handled almost exclusively by men. These feminist views of DV challenge the dominant narratives and encourage rethinking and recrafting of these rigid structures both in terms of how the collective Western society conceptualizes male and female behaviours and characteristics, to changing the dialogue around policy making to include not only women, but marginalized women, to create holistic policies and laws.

Feminism seeks to challenge these narratives of male domination and work towards the upheaval of all forms of violence, control, and female inequality and subordination. These goals involve challenging the dominant narratives that support the patriarchy and male superiority, while simultaneously replacing the discourses with supportive, uplifting, equitable narratives towards women. It is the hope that these changes will aid in reframing the Western world’s learned knowledge about not just men and women, but DV and other prominent social issues that disproportionately affect women and non-dominant groups.

The ideals of feminist theory have also influenced a change in the dominant narratives of DV particularly ones that framed DV as an individual problem. DV was traditionally looked at as a private problem to be addressed within the confines of one’s home, however, feminist theorists have since pushed back to vocalize how DV is a social issue in need of social, cultural, and political interventions to adequately address it (Torres & O’Conner, 2019). Historically, discourses about DV targeted women as the cause of DV by saying women are responsible for

“provoking” partners and that women “lie” about abuse or the severity of it (BetterHelp, 2022). These discourses work to empower perpetrators and encourage conditions for DV to continue. Feminist theorists challenged this discourse by replacing it with discourse concerning culture, society, structural inequalities, and introduced a new way to view DV and proposed solutions to it that required a fundamental shift in the conceptualization of DV (Torres & O’Conner, 2019). By bringing DV out of the private sector and framing it as a social issue, it drew attention to DV, educated individuals on the complexity of DV, and removed individual blame. These steps laid the groundwork for interventions such as challenging gender norms and initiating legislative changes in order to address the social root causes.

### **3.3 Benefits and Tensions:**

The benefits of using feminist theory are the framework in which it will allow for me to analyze the unfair distribution of power between men and women and will allow for me to critically engage with these concepts. It was also noted by Lay and Daley (2007) that social work practice through feminist theory challenges pathologizing discourses in relation to women and experiences of oppression and inequalities (as cited by Saulnier, 1996). This focal point will aid in my ability to produce a discourse analysis as it aligns with a focus on language and how it is crafted to create dominant narratives and perceptions about women which are reproduced and upheld by society. In regard to female oppression, Lay and Daley (2007) stated “oppression is embedded in the very socio-economic and political organization of our society” (pp.50) representing the complex ways in which female oppression and the overall power imbalances between men and women have become embedded as systematic reproduction that requires further intervention than changing one’s attitude. Analyzing discourses will provide an opportunity to explore how these discourses have framed and contributed to these systems and

further allow for a deeper analysis of how to transform problematic narratives into proactive narratives that would seek to dismantle institutionalized problems and create systemic changes.

However, feminism has been critiqued to center the voices of white cisgender women and neglect to give adequate attention to other groups, particularly women of colour and non-cisgender women (Maule, 2020). Lay and Daley (2007) argue that feminism focuses on male power and emphasizes that men can not help but be oppressive and that women being submissive is natural. It was also noted that feminism can be totalizing for women, by creating a narrative that focuses on oppression and “weaknesses” and not individual experiences (Lay & Daley, 2007). By highlighting the groups that are typically excluded from broad feminism narratives, such as women of colour, feminist theory will aid me in interrogating how literature explores women of all varieties such as transgender women and women of colour who may be excluded from the dominant views and discourses used to talk about DV.

To mitigate these concerns and ensure that this paper is as inclusive of the multitude of different perspectives it encompasses, I will remain cognizant of the voices and experiences commonly excluded such as transgender women and women of colour, and will work to actively acknowledge that these groups will have differing needs from the cisgender, white narrative that often takes the forefront of feminist movements. This will allow for me to critically examine the proposed solutions and interventions and work to assess how they may need to be modified for these groups. By relying on the feminist theorists outlined above, I intend to keep their values and perspectives at the forefront of my analysis to consider the impact on these groups and if they have been addressed by newsprint media.

This framework concerns itself with the historic experiences of oppression of women in a male dominated society. This particular lens will screen women’s experiences of DV through

this historic gaze and account for a pattern of oppression that has reinforced the experiences that are present today. As a result, it will act to see the contemporary ways in which female oppression has continued into modern society and how women’s oppression has adapted with modern times. This is important in identifying what current needs will look like and how to connect women seeking assistance with the appropriate resources and knowledge for their needs.

Moreover, feminist theory also offers insight and explanation into the difference in socialization of men and women and how socialization plays a role in reproducing gender norms and creates situations in which DV can exist and even be accepted. For example, using the understanding of socializing women to be submissive and men to be tough creates a situation in which men acting on anger is supposed to be seen and accepted as “masculine” and being submissive is to be seen as “feminine.” Seymour et al. (2021) acknowledge that men who participate in DV as perpetrators lack the understanding of gender norms and differences in power. Addressing and challenging these gender norms can assist in tackling DV as a social issue by breaking the binaries of gender and challenging what it means to be a “man” or “woman.” This critical opportunity creates pathways for social work and goal-oriented fields to undo some of the pressure put onto rigid gender norms and branch outward to showcase individual freedoms of self expression and further reinforce that “men” and “masculinity” do not have to equate violence and “women” and “femininity” do not have to equate subordination. Furthermore, it offers opportunities of education for both men and women about the reality of power differences and their impacts in society.

Feminist literature also reveals that a lack of female voices in positions of power such as in policy, leads to an overall lack of female perspective in the implementation of laws and services that primarily impact women (Haque & Yamin, 2020). Feminism notes that the cyclical



oppression of women preventing them from being able to achieve positions of power has led to the recreation and upholding of female oppression (Haque & Yamin, 2020). In cases of DV Haque and Yamin (2020) discuss how this is seen in lack of female policy makers able to voice opinions on services which results in male decisions continuing to take precedent over female voices when deciding what laws to create and enforce. They further note that more encouragement of women and girls needs to be enacted from men and women alike to help uplift females and support them in being able to contribute to society to their full potential (Haque & Yamin, 2020).

This particular theory is also limiting in a sense that it excludes the male experiences of DV both in terms of heterosexual partnerships and homosexual or other LGBTQ+ relationships, as well as excludes the voices of gender queer or transgender individuals. Though I recognize these circumstances of DV exist, I have chosen to focus on the predominant experiences of women as recipients of DV which best fits the scope and strengths of feminist theory.

## **CHAPTER 4: Methodology and Methods: A Critical Discourse Analysis**

### **4.1 Discourse Analysis:**

The methodology selected for this thesis was critical discourse analysis (CDA). According to Fairclough (2001), CDA is an interdisciplinary analysis that concerns itself with social issues and meaning-making associated with the language used that impacts social processes while further interrogating the impacts of power and domination on outcomes and relationships of said social processes. CDA demonstrates a clear focus on interrogating power at a social level by seeking to explore who holds power, how they exercise that power, and how they remain in power. This is in line with my theoretical framework as CDA and Feminist theory both exhibit a commitment to challenging and uncovering systems of power that are maintained and reproduced through policy and social interactions. Moreover, both do well with examining the social contexts connected to their focuses in addition to the connotations attached to particular dominant discourses. Specifically, Fairclough (2001) argues that discourse is interdisciplinary, and focuses on spaces where discourse occurs, as well as the impact of various figures of power.

Fairclough (2001) also discussed critical discourse analysis to be future-oriented and looking for changes and improvements that can be made and implemented. In relation to the goals of my thesis, a review of available services and possible recommendations and improvements moving forward was something that I valued, which fits well with the aims of CDA according to Fairclough (2001). The use of a feminist CDA plays a crucial role in being able to recognize and draw attention to the mainstream societal positioning of the particular discourses that impact women and other individuals affected by DV, which are being reproduced and the implications that this has on those connected to DV.

#### **4.2 Feminist Approach to CDA:**

Feminist theory seeks to fill some of the gaps in understanding DV as a primarily female issue due to its interrogation and explanation of gender power dynamics and critically looking at who holds power in policy-making and government and those in the positions to make and enact changes and laws that are affecting the services that women are interacting with. In the case of DV, feminist literature recognizes a lack of women in decision making roles, offering explanation as to why women’s services are suffering as they lack women’s voices and perspectives. Haque and Yamin (2020) offer that a lack of women in decision-making roles prevents other women from being encouraged to access these positions and further recognizes a continuation of men in power being complacent with keeping women in “traditional” and “safe” roles like being a child-bearing wife whose duties involve caring for a home and children. When combining critical discourse analysis with a feminist framework, a story unfolds that speaks to the connection of male power and language used to propel the understanding of DV and the power that this understanding of DV has when media outlets can either push back against these injustices or act as a modality for them to continue.

A feminist CDA is appropriate and beneficial as the selected methodology for the intended parameters of this paper due to the intrinsic connection and societal understanding of women as being most affected by DV. A feminist lens allows for interrogation into the social and structural conditions that allow for and support the existence of DV, but also a pertinent viewpoint in examining the role of language in newsprint media outlets and the beliefs and “knowledge” that these outlets support and convey. As a result, this would allow for a feminist comprehension of the societal factors impacting women to be examined, as well as help identify areas for improvement and in need of changes. For example, newsprint media promoting

problematic messages about women affected by DV can signify a need to improve society’s conceptualization of women and combat stereotypes to aid in creating equity and social justice. Moreover, just as CDA is concerned with power of language and meaning-making, feminist theory is equally concerned with power and control and the use of these methods to continue to subordinate and marginalize others. Over the course of my discourse analysis, I intend to analyze the impact of this on DV by using feminist theory to assist me in understanding how female oppression has been reproduced in society and seeing any emerging themes or conclusions that can be drawn by how newspapers cover DV and the language that they use to do so in relation to traits and qualities associated with being a woman.

Feminist theory also fits within the scope of my research as McGregor (2003) discusses how discourse impacts knowledge and power. These two important concepts are intrinsically tied to the scope of feminist theory as feminist theory relies upon how oppression of women has been socially constructed and reproduced in society over multiple generations (DeVault, 1996). These terms themselves imply an understanding of knowledge and how that knowledge is passed between individuals as well as the power that one is allotted as a result of the ways in which society is educated about social norms. As a result, the discourse used in my selected media (newspapers), will indicate the “knowledge” modern society has around DV, specifically journalists. Feminist theory takes the position that social norms and behaviours are learned, leading to discovering an understanding for what social conditions and gender norms are valued and implicitly passed down to newer generations via social reinforcement including media outlets. Newspaper articles will thereby be examined by the way in which they communicate about DV and the language chosen to do so which will interrogate power of the media sources themselves, and the power of men who enact violence while simultaneously examining the lack

of power of women. By interrogating the language used to discuss and promote women’s oppression, there is room created to understand the difference in power dynamics which can then be used to address logical and meaningful next steps to combat the power differences noted and improve resources and conditions for women affected by DV.

#### **4.3 CDA and Print Media:**

Newspaper media is relied upon by the public for obtaining information about current events and pressing social issues. This gives media outlets a certain level of power in being able to control what information is being made publicly available. In relation to DV, interrogating this power with a CDA focus, allows for analysis of how newsprint media has played a role in upholding or challenging socially dominant narratives in terms of women as being affected by DV.

The newsprint media contains its own modalities of power which include being able to control what is written about and more importantly, *how* it is written about. Consideration to what has led to circumstances of DV and why it continues to be such a prevalent occurrence is crucial in unpacking how DV has been able to evolve with modern times and the importance of language and discourse around how it is talked about and further understood.

Teo (2000) in a CDA on newsprint media and racism stated “... news headlines have to be crafted ... to employ the minimum number of words to package maximum information. Thus, every word in a headline is carefully chosen and structured so as to maximize the effect of the headline” (pp. 14). Teo (2000) continued to state the pertinence of this as it often indicates “... ideological values and attitudes, and analysing the lexical choices and syntactic structures of newspaper headlines as well as the captions of photographs ... would allow the critical discourse

analyst a peek into the underlying ideological meaning behind newspaper reporting” (pp.14). As a result, CDA is a useful method employed for print media as it aids in gathering background information and indicating the positionality and beliefs of those reporting on it. Teo (2000) further posited an element of purposeful manipulation from the use of language that guide readers to certain conclusions and reinforced views by referencing the war on drugs and how those involved in handling/distributing drugs are made out to be demonized (and often racialized community members) and police are set up to be heroes with the power and control and playing a crucial role in keeping society safe. These purposeful descriptions aid in manipulating readers into siding with police and their actions and distorts the full picture by neglecting to include select details and other background information. For example, Teo (2000) also referenced an article heading that described an alleged drug-dealer as part of a “dangerous gang” and exemplified a rephrased heading that removed the negative descriptor to showcase the drastic difference in how the headline reads. Moreover, the removed description was also stated to have “punctured” the power associated with the role of police as it challenged police as society’s protector and allowed for the public to conclude that police may be unnecessarily violent or in the wrong (Teo, 2000).

In relation to DV, especially in the time frame of the pandemic, CDA can illuminate the selective word choices, and ultimately the underlying assumptions and beliefs being presented, by interrogating the carefully selected phrases and discourses used to describe this population and this social issue. It will also provide insight into how reporters of the various newspapers view the effects of the pandemic in relation to DV as well as speak to the added interest due to the rising prevalence of DV during the height of Covid-19. This will further allow for me to analyze the role that newsprint media plays in contributing to or challenging dominant narratives

that are associated with women as being affected by DV. By interrogating the language used by newspaper media sources, it can provide an understanding of how these dominant ideas about DV are reproduced and widespread as newspapers come with a general public trust that involves many individuals taking information provided by said newspapers as fact, impacting the understanding of DV at a social level. I will also exercise caution around the missing viewpoints and word choices that point the reader in an overt direction. This can be useful in pinpointing what potentially problematic viewpoints and beliefs are being reproduced by the media and provide a starting point for the commencement of groundwork in order to address the negative effects of such beliefs, particularly on the populations affected.

#### **4.4 Data Collection:**

For this discourse analysis, my exploration of this topic is fueled largely by curiosity around how DV was covered during Covid-19 lockdown in Ontario, Canada. In order to locate and select my data sources, I followed these steps:

First, I used the search bar on the main pages of the newspaper sources accessible via McMaster University library for the Hamilton Spectator, the Toronto Star, and Globe and Mail to plug in my key terms. For each resource, I used the key terms of “domestic violence” and “Covid-19” (the latter was interchanged with “coronavirus” on each site to see if it impacted the results that were returned). I made the conscious decision to use language of “domestic violence” specifically as research indicated that intimate partner violence (IPV) was a subcategory of DV and I felt that the more encompassing umbrella term of DV would stand a better chance at encapsulating of a broader range of experiences of my intended demographic. Again, remaining cognizant that individuals could not relay the terms they preferred, DV appeared to cover a broader range of experiences, including IPV.

Next, I screened the results that it produced by time period. Any article published in the window of March 2020 to March 2021, was further screened by location (which was often verified by the headline, or using the command F function to search for Ontario). Results that did not mention Ontario, or did not talk about DV in a tone that applied to Ontario, were omitted. Then, using the same method of screening by headline, command F, and reading the articles, I reviewed each article for the terms violence/abuse and Covid-19/coronavirus. Any articles that did not include both terms, or did not discuss these factors in the body were then omitted. Several articles also appeared twice, under the same newspaper outlet. These repeats were omitted. This process yielded an initial 49 articles for consideration that met all of the requirements.

During this screening, I did notice a unanimous lack of mentioning transgender women. As a result, I conducted a further search on each of the three newspaper sites to search for transgender women and DV. These searches produced minimal results, none of which encompassed transgender women, DV, and Covid-19.

I define females/women over the course of this discourse analysis as those identifying as such (which would include transgender individuals). Upon analyzing literature set around same sex partnerships and women as perpetrators in the context of Covid-19 as well as in the context of newspaper media, there was an underwhelming amount of literature available, signalling a lack of attention surrounding these groups and a further need to bring their voices to light in future work. As a result, and due to the constraints of a discourse analysis and this thesis, I wanted to contribute to and interrogate the dominant narratives available surrounding the extent to which newsprint media discourses involving women as recipients of DV in heterosexual partnerships and the impact that these discourses have had. I further wanted to interrogate the



cultural and societal contributions to upholding power differences between men and women and to seek to understand how language contributes to the oppressive experiences of women in the Western society through the modality of newsprint media. This resulted in collecting 49 articles for analysis, however, five articles were later cut from this initial analysis as the exploration of their contents did not strongly anchor them to similar themes that were being explored by the other articles. This left 43 articles involved in the analytic process.

I chose to focus my CDA on newsprint media, specifically from the Hamilton Spectator, the Toronto Star, and the Globe and Mail during the period of March 2020 to March 2021. I had selected this timeframe to track the ways that DV emerged as a social issue in print media with the emergence of Covid-19 in March of 2020. Keeping the focus of the thesis in this time range allowed for me to clearly track the patterns and changes of newspaper media identifying where conversations around DV began to emerge. By limiting it to a year, this allowed for me to compare where conversations were at the start of the pandemic, to where conversations ended up on the anniversary of the pandemic onset. This also provided an opportunity to evaluate the most pressing concerns to emerge from the issues raised concerning increased DV and if changes were implemented and what they would look like in a year’s time. Furthermore, I selected titles pertinent to the area I am focusing on (Hamilton/Toronto area) or articles that discuss Canadian statistics in a general sense like things that have been noted across Canada and/or Ontario as a whole that still pertain to the outlined geographic focal point.

#### **4.5 Analysis:**

My research was then analyzed and reviewed for emerging themes while being informed by Fairclough’s CDA in combination with a feminist lens. Fairclough’s stance and position on CDA discusses social power relations (2001) which was a primary focus with this research as I

took a strong interest in examining the power of the media in terms of disseminating knowledge and information about DV. CDA has also been discussed to be modernizing and keeping up with changing times (Fairclough, 2001). This is particularly important, for the focus of this discourse analysis as the emergence of Covid-19 has changed the world and operations that services have needed to and continue to need to adapt to. Recognizing modernity and possible changes in discourse serves this thesis by being able to adapt to an understanding that Covid-19 has caused significant changes in the DV realm, including what the future of services may be or need to be.

Notably, there is also a strong grounding to semiosis with Fairclough (2001) that explored the meaning making accomplished through language and other visual cues such as images and body language/facial expressions. This is another important concept valued throughout this thesis as the importance of language and discourse gains power from the interpretations and meaning assigned to it from society. This eloquently flows together with the concept of power and knowledge dissemination explored in the thesis that aims to interrogate the social positioning of newspaper media and the discourses they use to discuss DV and pass down to members of the public, thus enforcing particular interpretations upon the public that fit with their understanding, as reinforced by the power of their social positioning. When employed in combination with a feminist perspective, the analysis can be furthered to encapsulate meaning making that has been associated with gender norms/roles and how they are reproduced in society.

Drawing on the three-step CDA method as laid out by Fairclough et al. (2001), I engaged in the following steps: A) Text, to encompass speech, writing, and images, B) discursive practice, to address the interpretations and attitudes promoted by said texts, and C) social practice, to indicate the social relationships and norms created by the aforementioned.

A) TEXT:

Of the 49 articles, each was carefully reviewed to interrogate how they presented DV and the language employed to do so. This resulted in notable interpretations related to identity, particularly around promoting those affected by DV as either “victims” or “survivors,” discourses about supporting women who experience DV during the pandemic, and discourses on the interface between public health, Covid-19, and DV.

B) DISCURSIVE PRACTICE:

From here, articles were interpreted to analyze the attitudes and beliefs that they promoted based on these main findings. This resulted in the interpretations that for identity discourses “victims” were talked about as deceased, a legal term, or to refer to heightened “victim” severity due to Covid-19. For discourses supporting women who experience DV during the pandemic, this produced interpretations that there were either barriers to accessing existing services for DV due to the increased demand for service from Covid-19, or the interpretation that services have been inadequate prior to the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic and in need of structural changes. Discourses regarding the interface between public health, Covid-19, and DV yielded interpretations that closing “non-essential” businesses disproportionately affected women, interpretations that stay-at-home orders created ease of access for perpetrators to increase severity of DV, and interpretations that social distancing further reduced capacities and access to support networks/resources.

C) SOCIAL PRACTICE:

Finally, articles were reviewed for the social norms that they supported and conveyed. Identity discourses conveyed messages that supported viewing “victims” as helpless and to be pitied, which not only neglects to capitalize off of their strengths to help create necessary changes to systems and social processes, but also refrains from achieving the wishes of those affected by DV in terms of navigating the legalities of DV or what they see as solutions to help end DV while continuing to stigmatize the experiences and blame those experiencing DV. Discourses supporting women who experience DV during the pandemic conveyed concerns that DV resources do not encompass holistic services, nor do they receive enough funding to keep up with the demand for service. Discourses of the interface between public health, Covid-19, and DV promoted messages that public health mandates created conditions to further disadvantage those affected by DV seeking support due to inadequate planning of the backlash that public health mandates would have on this community.

This process left me with five articles that did not strongly anchor to the above themes. This was either due to the articles being very short excerpts, or related to the actions taken by community members to partake in an act of kindness towards those affected by DV. For example, a couple articles mentioned DV, Covid-19, and were published within the designated time-frame and geographic focal point, yet briefly detailed putting up ribbons in the community to support those affected by DV, or donating flowers to a shelter. The ultimate lack of depth to these excerpts resulted in their omittance in order to focus on the above outlined social threads.

#### **4.6 Ethical Considerations:**

When I was in the process of narrowing down what I wanted my thesis to look like and entail, something that I was very keen on was not wanting to do live interviews when I settled on my topic. Since the material I would be accessing was available publicly, according to the ethics review board, I did not need to get ethics approval. I knew I wanted to do something around sexual assault and violence with a gendered lens, and once I had selected DV as a focal point, I was adamant on not wanting to make individuals reshare their stories, risking re-traumatization and exploitation of their pain for my own personal gains. Part of this decision was informed by my own experiences. Though I do not have a personal connection to DV, I have had numerous experiences that demonstrated a clear male-female power imbalance in favour of men. For my first experience, it took me years to be able to tell someone what happened, and it is still not a memory that I enjoy recounting. As a result, I did not want to force women to go through something that I know I would hate to go through. Even having the conscious understanding that there are undoubtedly women with lived experiences that are passionate about sharing their stories, the risks outweighed the pros for me. Therefore, to uphold individual comfort and safety and mitigate this risk, I opted for a discourse analysis that would use pre-existing data and reduce the exploitation of those affected by DV.

#### **4.7 Confidentiality and Consent:**

Consideration to confidentiality was addressed in the discourse analysis as individuals’ identities were not always kept confidential in the media sources reviewed. I am aware that the nature of my data collection relies on that of news media which I am aware may not be held to the same standards of confidentiality or levels of properly informing individuals. As a result, I remained hesitant of wanting to give credit when there is a name to give credit for as I could not reconfirm that that individual would be okay with me doing so, and instead, abiding by this

strange sort of assumed consent that is partnered with the public access to these stories and information. This led me to my next concern, that individuals could not withdrawal their consent due to the public nature of their information. So again, I was reliant on this assumed consent because it was accessed publicly. To mitigate this, I kept personal stories anonymous and avoided direct quotations to limit information being retraced to them.

#### **4.8 Reflexivity:**

In terms of risks and discomfort associated with the discourse analysis, since no interviewing of individuals took place, but only relying on publicly available means, the main risks and discomforts associated with this project would be that of my own that emerged from what my research uncovered and provoked. While I have no direct or personal experience with DV, I have experiences with other forms of gender-based issues that have put me in circumstances of unrest, fear, shame, and helplessness. While I wrote this discourse analysis through my own reflections and experiences, I personally took issue with and problematized some of the language used to describe those affected by DV, such as “victim” and “survivor.” When I think about myself and the experiences I have had, these terms never felt representative to me. They felt like they reinforced the helplessness that I felt in my encounters and burdened me with feeling like I got off “easy,” or it could have been “worse.” Afterall, I “survived” right? But this further prompted me to consider what *survival* even was, or how I could have survived something when it felt like a part of me had died. “Survivor” never felt like a term that I even had the *choice* to use, and in recognizing my own discomfort with the language used to describe these similar experiences, reinforced the notion that those affected by DV did not have a voice in crafting the language used to describe themselves or their experiences either. Recognizing this was important to be cognizant of, as it reinforced assumed beliefs of those in power, and the

language they feel is appropriate, without the consideration of what this language means to those affected by it.

The journalists spoke extensively about “survivors” and “victims” and my choice to interrogate these terms speaks to my own experiences and my uncertainty with how to identify with a term that feels representative to my experiences. For years I have struggled with using the term “victim” and even more so, “survivor” in attempt to make sense of my experiences with assault and gendered violence. Media of all varieties and social connotations made me feel like a “victim” suffered and maybe even lost their life as a result. Upon reflection of my experiences, I never felt as if I suffered greatly *enough* to be called a “victim” as others with similar stories shared in the media seemed to be so much worse than my experiences that I felt as though we did not deserve to share the same title. “Survivor” felt like a much more foreign term to me as social contexts would imply that a “survivor” faced a threat to their life and overcame it. In my personal experiences, I never felt like my life was threatened, even though it easily could have been. This again felt like a term that after hearing the stories of others, I also did not deserve to use. My personal problematization of these terms reflects my own understandings of how media has talked about and created these terms to be representative of particular images with specific societal meanings attached to them. I still find myself uncertain of how I would describe myself, which has guided me to thinking about the lack of terminology we have to recognize and identify those who are affected by life-altering situations. Oxford dictionary uses similar terms for both “victim” and “survivor” using discourse like “injured” or “killed,” (victim, 2022) and “nearly killed,” and “great danger” (survivor, 2022) reflecting the rigid descriptors of language surrounding unwanted experiences. These terms invoke a sense of force and vicious displays of violence. Though there are undoubtedly many women affected by DV who may choose to use

these terms and find them encompassing of their experiences, I also recognize women facing different forms of mistreatment such as emotional and mental violence, or women who may identify with their experiences of DV on a spectrum and may feel that these definitions are too intense for their experiences. Guided from my own positionality, I exercise caution around these discourses in effort to be encompassing of all experiences of DV in recognition that the nature of a discourse analysis does not allow me the space for individuals affected to personally tell me which terms they identify with.



## **CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS**

My findings are based on reviewing 43 news media articles primarily between April and May 2020 and November 2020, which coincided with the government mandated lockdowns due to concerns about the high levels of Covid-19 transmission. I drew on articles from three newspapers including the Hamilton Spectator (N=14), the Toronto Star (N = 17), and the Globe and Mail (N=12). My findings will focus on three dominant themes that emerged through my discourse analysis of the 43 news media articles. These included a) the media’s use of “victim” and “survivor” discourses, b) women’s experiences of DV and access to resources, and c) public health discourses that centered on responses to DV in light of Covid-19.

### **5.1 Identity Discourses:**

A common discourse that emerged through my CDA was identity discourses and the way that the print media dichotomized the identities of women who experience DV as one of two subthemes being A) “survivors,” and B) “victims”. Although the terms “survivor” and “victim” were often used interchangeably to connote the positioning of women who experience DV in relation to their abuser, it became clear that these terms were used to shape their identities and experiences. “Victim” discourses were further broken down into three categories including i) “victim” as a death ii) “victim” as a legal term, and iii) “victim” as worsened by Covid-19. “Survivor” discourses were discussed in a singular narrative to highlight the theme i) burdens associated with those that have “survived” these experiences of DV. Four articles used the term “victim” as a way to describe a woman as a casualty of a DV relationship and mark her death. This acted to reinforce the notion that “victims” experienced great danger and ultimately lost their lives. It further fixated on suffering and the danger of DV by framing those who have passed away due to DV as individuals who are to be pitied and feel sorry for by focusing solely

on pain and negative experiences instead of seeing them in light of all of the other aspects that make up an individual. Four articles used “victim” as a legal term in regard to the process of charging/persecuting a perpetrator. This created and upheld the narrative that “victims” are a legal person and the identity associated with being a “victim” is that they are involved with reporting their experiences and attempting to get justice, even though DV cases are heavily underreported. Four articles used the term “victim” to refer to experiences that were complicated due to the circumstances of Covid-19. These discourses sought to highlight the additional challenges brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic and how it further complicated the experiences of those affected by DV by making it more of an occurrence that was able to be kept more secretive due to lack of resource accessibility and stay-at-home orders. Each of these narratives impact the identity of those affected by DV by crafting their story as a singular narrative when those individuals are much more than this narrow view. These rigid confines thereby affect how individuals view those affected by DV by adapting to see them as the rigid, singular narratives they are presented as in the newsprint media. This further impacts the complex needs of those affected by DV being adequately addressed. “Survivor” discourse was noted from seven articles which discussed the burdens/stressors and responsibilities associated with being a “survivor.” This contributed to the narrative that those affected by DV have the responsibility to educate others and advocate for their own supports and personal wellbeing. These narratives have the potential to impact the experiences of those with DV as they draw little attention to DV as a social issue and instead add further stress to those who have experienced DV.

A. The Victim:

- i) DV cases resulting in Death:

The following four articles detailed how the term “victim” was used to signify death of an individual. Journalist O’Reilly (2020) stated that “The top goal for all police and social service agencies is to prevent killings. And yet these homicides happen, sometimes despite the victims and their families doing all the right things.” Furthermore, journalist Miller (2020) stated that one male perpetrator “was granted bail with two sureties and a court order to wear a GPS tracking device, but ‘it wasn’t enough to protect the victim,’” in reference to a woman who lost her life at the hands of this partner. Journalist Renzetti (2020c) stated “Even though the killer explicitly told his victims that he hated feminists” in regard to a targeted attack of women fueled by misogyny. Moreover, journalist Hayes (2021c) identified that statistics highlighting an increase in the deaths of women in 2020 noted that “The Canadian Femicide Observatory for Justice and Accountability (CFOJA) was able to discern the relationship between the victim and her killer in 64 per cent of cases where a killer was identified. Within those, 50 per cent of killers were a current or former partner of their victim.” Included in these articles was the view that “victims” of DV were those killed by their partner as reinforced by discourse surrounding how that term was used by journalists. Only the term “victim” was used to refer to those killed by a partner. This crafts the narrative that “victims” are associated with great pain and hardships and ultimately killed by a partner. This however, focuses on negative experiences of DV without adequately addressing DV as a social issue, nor the other complex experiences and qualities that make up those who experience DV.

ii) Victim as a Legal Term:

In contrast, other articles used the term “victims” as a legal term to indicate those involved in legal processes. For example, journalist O’Reilly (2020) quoted that “In Ontario mandatory charges must be made in domestic violence cases even if victim does not want them

to press charges.” Journalist Gillis (2020b) stated that “... victims who are registered with the province's Victim Notification System will be informed when a relevant offender is released.” Journalist Miller (2020) noted “Police say he was released with a GPS monitoring device ‘despite clear concerns regarding his risk to the victim.’” Journalists Gillis and Hasham (2020a) Noted that “Family court support workers continue to offer help to domestic violence victims going through the family court process.” These discourses promote a lack of autonomy by essentially forcing individuals affected by DV to become involved in the legal process by having no choice to not press charges or what they want to pursue in their experiences. Furthermore, the focus of navigating the justice system combined with a lack of autonomy can contribute to rigid views that “victims” seek justice and are only recognized as “victims” in the eyes of broader society if they act on their experiences and pursue legal action.

iii) Victim as Worsened by Covid-19:

Meanwhile, the following articles used “victim” in the context of increasing frequency and severity as a result of Covid-19 measures. Journalist Rankin (2020) noted that “Social distancing measures like school closures or workplaces encouraging or requiring people to work from home risked creating “invisible victims” out of women.” Rankin (2020) further stated women were ““in a situation where the partner has relatively unlimited access to them in the private location of the home.”” Journalist Gillis (2020b) stated “...many instances of intimate partner or family violence go unreported at the best of times, let alone during a pandemic when victims may be confined to their homes with their abusers. Journalist Gillis (2020c) Noted “...shelter workers have seen an increase in violence involving an intimate partner; others have reported a drop in calls for service, which experts in this violence say could signal an inability of

the victims to call for help safely...” Owen (2020a) stated “But calls from family, friends and even employers of women experiencing violence have increased significantly, she said, since public health restrictions mean victims are more isolated.” These discourses partake in a systematic framing of DV as a heteronormative issue that frames women as “victims” and men as perpetrators, and further promotes a diminishing of power by discussing women in a negative way that fixates on hardships. The way the newsprint media crafts women as “victims” is to invoke a sense of helplessness, in place of examining their power and how to contribute to upholding and building off of their strengths. It also roots blame in Covid-19 and neglects to address how many DV services have been overburdened and struggling prior to the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. These factors can impact the identity and experiences of those affected by DV by encouraging them to dwell on a state of negativity instead of capitalizing off of their strengths to advocate for their needs and concerns. This thereby keeps them complacent in their experiences and can harm their sense of empowerment.

B. The Survivor:

i) “Survivor” and Burden:

Journalist Mattoo (2020) stated “... Many women, migrants and refugees who have survived scarcity and endured physical pain. They could have shared their wisdom - their learned experience as survivors.” Journalist Gillis (2020b) stated “Another concern for survivors of violence is that their incarcerated abuser may be let out of jail.” Journalists Gillis and Hasham (2020b) stated “Services include policing, legal support, counselling, housing and financial help, which address the variety of problems facing survivors of domestic and sexual violence” O’Reilly (2020) stated ““As much as we want to raise awareness... we want to try and minimize how much we’re revictimizing survivors.”” Journalists Gillis and Hasham (2020a) stated

“Services include policing, legal support, counselling, housing and financial help, which address the variety of problems facing survivors of domestic and sexual violence...” Leonard (2020) stated “... She aims to raise \$15,000 to use towards an online resource for survivors of sexual assault to report their stories and help them access support and healing.” Journalist Feagan (2020) noted “Friends and family can support survivors of abuse both logistically and emotionally...” and further added “Counselling with a licensed professional can support survivors in processing their experiences, understanding the impact of their trauma and ideally assisting them in their adjustment...” Owen (2020b) noted “A survivor’s debt load, credit rating, and their ability to access housing and educational opportunities may be affected for years, long after they’ve left an abusive relationship...” These discourses promote the many intricate pieces associated with being affected by DV as well as contribute to dealing with personal outcomes of DV (specifically on those affected by it) and not taking larger action to address it as a social issue which would include policy adjustments, addressing men’s behaviour, and revamping social norms and ideologies.

## **5.2 Discourses Supporting Women Who Experience Domestic Violence During Covid-19:**

Within the articles, an emerging discourse was related to resourcing people experiencing DV. These discourses focused on the availability, access, and barriers to DV resources which contributed to two subthemes: A) Covid-19 as causing barriers to accessing DV resources, and B) DV resources as having inadequate existing services. Seven articles argued that resources were under additional stress caused by the Covid-19 pandemic leading to additional barriers to accessing said services. This placed the blame on Covid-19 for causing an influx of individuals needing to access services at once, promoting that these services were functioning well prior to the onset of the pandemic and did not problematize DV as a social issue in need of root

interventions. 12 articles posited that DV services have been struggling to keep up with demand prior to the emergence of Covid-19 and argued that the system has needed intervention for a long time as well as addressing DV at its roots to decrease demand for DV resources overall.

A. Barriers to Access:

Some journalists discussed Covid-19 as creating additional barriers to accessing these DV resources. For example, Journalist Antonacci (2020a) stated “The lack of reliable internet access in certain corners of the sprawling rural counties complicates online service delivery, and the cost of data can be a hindrance to a low-income client whose cellphone is her lifeline to the shelter.” LeTourneau (2020) stated “... With people staying home because of COVID-19, a woman experiencing intimate partner violence may not even be able to access the internet safely if the perpetrator is home.” Moreover, journalist Hamilton (2020) focused on Indigenous communities and stated that “... during the pandemic and the resulting isolation there is help, and although there is no walk-in service due to COVID-19, ... she hopes the service will return in the near future.” Journalist Rodney (2020) offered “However, the ability to access these resources may be more limited because of measures taken to prevent the virus from spreading” in relation to stay-at-home orders. Journalists Willoughby et al., (2020) stated “As cities begin to reopen, there is a moment of opportunity to provide information, access, and protection to those at risk, all of which have been strained due to resource and movement restrictions during the lockdowns.” An article by The Canadian Press (2020) also stated “The United Nations has called violence against women and girls during the COVID-19 crisis a ‘shadow pandemic,’ as social isolation and concerns over health, safety and financial security increase tension.” Using discourse associated with DV emerging as a pandemic in the shadows of Covid-19, negates the

levels of DV that occurred prior to the onset of the pandemic. Journalist Rankin (2020) stated “We did, however, have one client who was unable to participate in her appointment because the abuser was in the home with her” in relation to accessibility of DV resources. Journalists Casert and Charlton (2020) noted “world leaders called for action to stop the abuse, which has worsened because of the coronavirus pandemic this year.” These discourses attached to Covid-19 as a barrier to accessing services has resulted in upholding the notion that services such as shelters for those affected by DV have been operating well before the pandemic, and negates the pushback that recognizes that there have been issues to operations prior to the pandemic. It further neglects to consider the experiences of those affected by DV in accessing said services and contributes overlooking those with lived experience and their needs.

#### B. Inadequate Existing Services:

Other articles argued that while Covid-19 may have complicated access to services, these services already had a longstanding history of struggling, meaning the level of services were already inadequate to serve the population before the boom of increased demand for services from the pandemic. For example, journalist Mason (2020b) and journalist Renzetti (2020b) stated “... A CBC investigation in 2019 found that more than 600 women and children were being rejected from these shelters every day.” Moreover, Mason (2020b) stated that “And therein lies the first big problem we have here in Canada: not nearly enough shelter spaces for women to turn to when they fear dangerous circumstances at home are about to take a violent twist – or already have.” Journalist Hayes (2020a) further quoted that ““For us, it doesn’t really matter whether we’re talking about COVID-19, pre- or post-. We continue to do the work, and we know that it’s an epidemic”” in regard to the continuation of frontline work and efforts. The



acknowledgement of a pre Covid-19 context also supports that these services have been struggling against this issue prior to the onset of the pandemic. Journalist Leonard (2020) stated “... isn’t the only person who is trying to find solutions to the lack of resources for survivors of violence, assault and harassment.” This indicates a battle against DV that predates the onset of the pandemic as well as highlights ongoing service challenges. Journalists Smith and Mcfadzean (2020b) also noted “As we have learned throughout history, global crises have the potential to increase risks of violence and threat. Evidence has already illustrated that this is the case during COVID-19 as well.” Journalist Hayes (2020b) offered “... questions why domestic violence is consistently treated as a temporary crisis to be solved in a piecemeal fashion” in regard to news of incoming government funding for DV services. Journalist Mason (2020a) stated “Most of us agree that violence against women is a blight on our culture. And we all nod our heads in agreement when it’s suggested governments should do more about the problem.” Journalists Gillis and Hasham (2020b) stated “a woman or girl was killed every 2.5 days in 2018, according to the Canadian Femicide Observatory for Justice and Accountability - is now under review by a leading expert on violence against women.” Journalist Owen (2020a) noted “the pandemic has exacerbated existing fears and challenges.” Journalist Clairmont (2020b) stated “Women’s shelters are notoriously underfunded and overcrowded at the best of times.” Journalist Renzetti (2020b) further offered “The system was strained to breaking even before the enforced closeness and economic misery of coronavirus.” These discourses highlight the pre-existing struggles of DV resources and the history of these issues being inadequately addressed. They further serve to uphold and recognize DV as a social issue and validates the experiences of those affected by it which can lead to further empowerment and encourage further advocacy and social change.

### **5.3 Discourses on the Interface Between Public Health, Covid-19 and Domestic Violence:**

This discourse is concerned with the public health responses in relation to both Covid-19 and DV and was further divided into three subthemes: A) closing “non-essential” businesses, B) stay-at-home orders, and C) social distancing. One article articulated an imbalance between men and women’s labour as a result of mandates to close “non-essential” businesses that unfairly targeted women and women’s labour. This was further argued to reinforce female financial dependence on a spouse or partner and prevent women from being financially able to leave a partner enacting violence upon them. 17 articles also argued that public health measures neglected to appropriately plan or address the impact of stay-at-home orders on those involved in DV relationships or cohabitation circumstances. Three articles interrogated social distancing measures, two of which criticized social distancing measures as directed by public health mandates to be poorly designed as they caused an already overburdened shelter system to have to turn away more individuals needing support with inadequate alternatives set up.

A. Closing “Non-essential” Businesses:

The notion of the labour divide and financial compensation of men and women was discussed as a factor that increased hardships for women and reinforced their experiences of DV. Journalist Pecoskie (2020) noted that women are predominantly affected by increased DV experiences as a result of public health measures due to lay-offs that targeted women more than men, reducing their financial insecurity and reinforcing dependence on a partner for support. Pecoskie (2020) stated “gender segregation in the labour market has led women to be in many of the occupations hardest hit by the pandemic, including retail, food service and child care.” Pecoskie (2020) further noted that “Men, meanwhile, are more likely to work full time, in occupations such as construction and manufacturing, which were not as affected by the economic

downturn caused by COVID-19.” The discourse surrounding this public health measure notes that women have been targeted as a result of these protocols to shut down certain labour sectors contributing to upholding male interests and economic stability.

#### B. Stay-At-Home Orders:

Journalists Gillis (2020a) and Alhmidi (2020) also highlighted that survey results found that approximately ten percent of women were fearful of DV increasing due to stay-at-home orders, recognizing that there was knowledge circulating that stay-at-home orders would put more women at risk. Journalist Kerr (2020) stated “public health officials are saying, "Stay home," framing it as the safest place to be right now. But for many women, and a minority of men, it's not safe at all.” Journalist Hasham (2020) noted that Children’s Aid Society Toronto would be prioritizing public health while continuing to operate. This discourse further exemplifies the precedence given to supporting and upholding the power given to public health figures who neglected to consider or put into effect any protective measures for vulnerable communities such as those affected by DV with the implementation of stay-at-home orders.

Journalist Gillis (2020c) brought to light that public health officers declined to respond to an open letter regarding directing resources at preventing DV behaviour. Again, this discourse highlights a need and recognition that women are disproportionately at risk with stay-at-home orders and that the root cause is not adjusting women’s responses to DV, but rather addressing men’s behaviour and structures that target women, both of which are not accomplished through the prioritization of public health measures and public health representatives not protecting at risk community members. Several articles also recognize that despite public health recommendations, home is not the safest place to be for those affected by DV (Benzie, 2020;

Clairmont, 2020a; Cranker, 2020; Hunter, 2020; Kerr, 2020; Krugel, 2020; Ngabo, 2021; Owen, 2020a; Owen, 2020b; Smith & Mcfadzean, 2020a; and Wright, 2020b). This discourse exemplifies the concern around lack of focus on female dominated issues. Journalist Wright (2020a) discusses the notion that women are viewed to be most at risk for the virus and health planning around women’s needs, including DV, is not apparent in public health priorities, nor is it reflected in their protocols. This contributes to impacting the identity and experiences of those affected by DV by putting their needs on the backburner and upholding the feeling that their needs are not valued or important.

### C. Social Distancing:

Journalist Weir (2021) discusses women waiting in isolation for a negative Covid test to be able to access the shelters and staff adherence to public health measures. This discourse outlines adherence to public health guidelines for safety, but does not acknowledge capacity limits of said shelters being impacted by social distancing measures and further reduced overall capacity. There is more attention surrounding how to socially distance everyone accessing the shelter services, but little done to outline how capacity overflow is being addressed. Overall, the discourse surrounding the positive view and upholding of public health measures, neglects to consider the dangerous implications that these same measures have on the lives of women affected by DV. This further represents a disinterest in women’s issues, even though newspaper media acknowledged stay-at-home orders would put women at greater risk, yet there was still a lack of planning put in place to adequately mitigate this issue. Mason (2020a) stated “And most of that funding is designed to help the shelters adapt to social distancing measures and purchase personal protective equipment for staff” in regard to a funding allotment. Rankin (2020) also noted “Social distancing measures like school closures or workplaces encouraging or requiring

people to work from home risk creating ‘invisible victims’ out of women...” These discourses problematizing public health measures like social distancing seek to support and center the needs of those affected by DV and empower their voices and experiences.

## CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION

As highlighted in my findings section, three themes emerged to include discourses of “victim” and “survivor” and that point toward how these identities are framed through journalistic discourse. Aanchal et al. (2020) noted that “victim” discourse evoked sympathy, pity, and an overall focus on pain, while “survivor” discourse elicited strength and resilience both of which are impactful to the identities of individuals who are labeled as one over the other. Meredith (2009) argued the importance of aid workers being cognizant of “victim” terminology due to the impact of the negative associations of the word on the identities of those involved. In extension, social work and other fields who interact with individuals affected by DV should exercise a similar caution and make efforts to gauge the word choices of the people they work with as a way to prevent forcing identities of “victim” and “survivor” discourses onto individuals. These forced identities that are promoted by both of these terms, particularly through journalistic discourse, impact how those affected by DV view themselves, but also how others learn to view them.

The next theme analyzed consisted of interrogating resources’ ability to function in a Covid-19 context, with a divide between rooting blame in Covid-19 as causing barriers to access due to an influx of individuals trying to access a resource, or rooting blame resources struggling with demand and adequate service operations prior to Covid-19 but being poorly addressed by government/policy adjustments, or ultimately ignored by these parties. Finally, the analysis uncovered discourses that complied with or criticized public health responses and mandates, citing that these mandates disproportionately affected those experiencing DV with poor planning into how to prevent the affects that the public health orders would have on this population. A common thread that runs through my discourse analysis of the themes are a) neo-liberalist

responses that individualize DV b) the invisibility of a structural and systemic response to DV, and c) a lack of voice of those with lived experiences, contributing to a cyclical continuation of policy makers working on behalf on front-line workers and those affected by violence themselves instead of in collaboration with them.

### **6.1: Theme a) Neo-Liberalist Responses that Individualize DV**

In order to analyze these discourses in the context of modern Western society, one must first understand neo-liberalism and the way in which it affects DV. Mehrotra et al. (2016) discussed neoliberalism as a shift away from government intervention of services and further individualization of social issues. Mehrotra et al. (2016) further noted that in the context of DV, neoliberalism has created a shift towards individual treatment instead of large systemic treatment of the issue and cited an increased criminalization of DV. In the context of discourses “victim” several articles noted this criminalization by using the term “victim” as a legal sense and bringing individuals to justice instead of tackling the larger existence of DV as a social issue. “Victim” and “survivor” discourses promoted messages of helplessness and pity that acted to break down the individual power of those affected by DV as opposed to encourage them to capitalize off of their experiences. Moreover, these binaries are rigid and employed singular narratives of those affected by DV in place of seeing them as a combination of many other aspects and qualities. Neoliberalism also contributed to rooting blame in women as the primary focus reflected in responses to DV included managing women’s responses, safety planning, and seeking treatment instead of incorporating a broader view to address root issues of DV concerned with power imbalance. Kaur and Garg (2008) argued the need to integrate male responsibility in order to address DV. Singh and Bullock (2020) posited through their own media analysis on DV, that there was a unanimous lack of conversation around addressing root causes of DV, which

worked to support male power. Eastal et al (2015) further recognized sympathy applied to women’s experiences of DV with little done to address men’s actions and other root causes while simultaneously upholding male dominance. This shift to individualize DV was also reflected by articles that noted that DV resources relied on fundraising to stay operational as noted by Alhmidi (2020), Hayes (2020b), Mason (2020a), Renzetti (2020a), and Renzetti (2020b). A neoliberalist shift away from government support has resulted in DV resources struggling to support themselves, especially in the context of Covid-19 while facing increased demand for service and inability to fundraise due to Covid-19 restrictions.

## **6.2: Theme b) Invisibility of a Structural and Systemic Response to DV**

Next, addressing the conditions of the Western society that rely on systems and social norms, there is a climate created that blindly values and neglects to question the operations of our relied upon systems and social norms which contribute to their ability to stay covert and intact. This promoted DV and the associated concerns being overlooked and inadequately involved in planning and mitigating experiences. DV is not a new issue, but rather one that garnered an increased amount of attention due to the influx of challenges it tolerated with the onset of Covid-19, which served to remind society that DV was, and still is, an issue. Speed et al. (2020) noted that according to history, disease and natural disaster have been contributing factors to the increasing DV rates, representing a pattern that is being repeated with Covid-19 and indicating DV as being a longstanding issue. The consistent response the newsprint media uncovered was that there is a hidden structural and systemic response to DV, meaning that DV continues to be something that is reproduced through and by society, yet remains unchallenged and unquestioned through inadequate changes. The newsprint media contributed to this by highlighting that there appeared to be a blatant disregard for those affected by DV when



mandates were launched, despite the fact that many voiced their concern of partners enacting violence upon them. These mandates also unequally laid off more women as compared to men based on the types of labour that women occupy and reinforced women’s financial dependence on men and their inability to have the means to leave a relationship affected by DV. Illingworth and Ferrara (2020) noted how women’s labour was hit hardest by the pandemic in terms of layoffs and risk of contracting the virus due to the close nature of their work with clients (such as cleaning and nursing home workers). This helped to highlight how women’s financial position was compromised during the pandemic, which acted to reinforce reliance on male support and to demonstrate the lack of planning that went into how women would be affected.

Discourses from the newsprint media that addressed how DV was able to remain covert, such as power imbalances and labour disparities, contributed to the ways in which DV has been able to be a pervasive social issue by neglecting to address root issues through adequate structural and systemic responses to DV. This also included discourses that complied with or criticized public health responses and mandates, citing that these mandates disproportionately affected those experiencing DV with poor planning into how to prevent the affects that the public health orders would have on this population. Resources’ ability to function in a Covid-19 context was also compromised as a divide emerged between rooting blame in Covid-19 as causing barriers to access due to an influx of individuals trying to access a resource, and rooting blame resources struggling with demand and adequate service operations prior to Covid-19 but being poorly addressed by government/policy adjustments, or ultimately ignored by these parties. Literature that sided with viewing DV as a long-standing issue that was ultimately pushed past its breaking point with demand from Covid-19 and poor planning from government and policy makers represented the invisibility of the myriad of issues DV resources were facing. This

included a lack of government financial support, lack of physical shelter spaces, and the housing crisis that bottlenecked discharges and prevented new intakes.

### **6.3: Theme c) Lack of Voice of Those with Lived Experiences**

Another important thread exposed was the lack of voices of those affected by DV being given the space for their voices to contribute to the structural changes and policy revamps needed to create meaningful changes. Instead, their perspectives seemed to be added in purposefully to create a good story. Quotes were used to stress personal pains, or reinforce the urgency of conditions, and heart felt contributions from family members of loved ones who had been killed. The spaces dedicated to inclusion neglected to give space to or create conversation of what their needs are. This erasure prevents services from meeting the full potential to holistically serve those experiencing DV. Peacock (2022) noted that women are often forced to pursue legal action and criminalization of perpetrators which often does not align with their wishes of seeking social and restorative justice. Peacock (2022) further highlighted that the criminal justice system disproportionately targets BIPOC and financially poor individuals further contributing to an overrepresentation of these communities being incarcerated, with no systemic and structural changes. Incorporating the voices and wishes of those affected by DV aid in providing the creation of meaningful changes for the population affected by it. The newsprint media discourse analysis exemplified how this perspective was missing as noted above, quotes and personal anecdotes were incorporated

### **6.4: Limitations**

As recognized above, there was an overall lack of representation in the newspaper media that acknowledged transgender perspectives. Though my CDA targets women and women-

identifying individuals, the newspaper articles were not reflective of outright defining or acknowledging the needs, voices, and concerns of transgender women experiencing DV. Instead, women were talked about in what I can only assume is a cisgender tone, as no mention of transgender women was brought to light. Given the knowledge of transgender women facing their own line of difficulties, their needs would not be the exact same as cisgender women in DV situations. “Transgender victims’ and survivors’ experiences of domestic abuse” (n.d.) mentions how gender identity may be used against them by partners as means of control, partners withholding their transgender medications, and purposefully using wrong pronouns to put them down. Given their specific needs that cisgender women do not relate to, and the absence of this lens, their concerns are generally ignored by newspaper media in terms of DV experiences. Moreover, there is already a lack of female voices in policy making and positions of power, meaning that there is also an overwhelming lack of transgender women’s perspectives as well as they make up a greater minority of women. Not having enough women involved in policy making means having less diverse women’s experiences involved in the creation and review of policies.

Another limitation is a lack of intersectional awareness and little to no context given to the ways in which race, ability, age, and so forth compound to further complicate the experience of DV in the newspaper media examined. Some articles spoke to these intersectional pieces to address specific needs of Indigenous populations or immigrants in passing like citing that Indigenous women were more likely to experience DV compared to white counterparts, but the majority of newspaper articles did not address these differing needs. Moreover, none of the articles examined gave a nod to the unique needs and experiences of black women, or women of colour, thus painting DV experiences in a singular narrative. Crenshaw (1989) discusses how

race complicates and furthers an oppressive experience by articulating the compounding effects of more than one form of oppression. Particularly in her discussion of gender and race being seen as mutually exclusive categories, she notes a crossroads that is excluded from the societal eye where race and gender are treated like mutually exclusive categories. It was further noted that the most privileged of an oppressed group obscure the claims of said groups (Crenshaw, 1986). This speaks to the notion that those without overlapping forms of oppression (in the case of feminism, white, cisgender, able-bodied women) take control over the movement and fight for women’s issues that are exclusive to their white, singular oppression experience, whereas, the results they are fighting for would not be transferable to intersectional groups of women such as women of colour, women with disabilities, transgender women, and so forth as their complicated needs create more complicated life experiences with the need for more complex intervention.

## **6.5: Implications**

In recognizing the findings and gaps presented, insight is offered into what needs to be addressed in order to give relief to a struggling field. Shelter capacities have been a longstanding issue that has fallen to the background of public view. Lack of attention and policy interventions to address ways to alleviate and improve the hardships associated with DV services and shelters have resulted in the continuation of services struggling to serve the needs of service users to the best of their ability. Discourses employed by newspaper media outlets need to be interrogated and challenged for their role in upholding problematic social norms that act to portray DV as a field that has been challenged exclusively by Covid-19.

The lack of discourse that surrounds transgender narratives also sets up social work and other similar goal-oriented fields need to be cognizant of the perspectives and needs of these individuals who may find traditional resources inaccessible. Similar efforts employed to uplift

and encourage women, must be employed with ALL women to increase the perspectives involved in policy making so that their needs are not being assumed. The unique barriers and challenges attached to transgender identities do not equally translate from cisgender women’s experiences. As a result, working collaboratively with transgender women to mitigate their barriers is crucial in supporting them and aiding them in acquiring the same policy making and government positions we are advocating for cisgender women to advance to.

This thesis set out to interrogate a curiosity surrounding how Covid-19 has impacted resources and services. These findings indicate that DV has been a pandemic long before the onset of Covid-19. This thesis unpacks the struggles of capacity issues and funding that has impacted the operational abilities of these heavily relied on and pertinent services. Furthermore, attention is drawn to the non dismissible examinations of root issues that would assist in creating logical and meaningful changes to alleviate pressure in the DV field while simultaneously improving the lives of women. Many solutions incorporate discourses that associate blame and onus onto those affected by DV (Chaudhuri, 2022). This means creating safety plans, hand signals/code words with neighbours and friends, and even self “healing” from one’s experiences, all which fall on the shoulders of those affected by DV. However, these “solutions” do not accomplish two very integral parts of DV. First of all, they do not attempt to problematize or change men’s actions or behaviours. This works to uphold male dominance in society while working to subordinate women and their experiences. Next, these approaches also fail to introduce the myriad of ways that society needs to be improved to equate women with similar levels of power and financial compensation as men. Women occupy low-paying, precarious labour, and far fewer advancement opportunities than men in their fields, and also hold less power in terms of representing those involved in policy-making. Tackling these root issues,

would work to create circumstances for women to gain power and independence, instead of this socially accepted and promoted norm that women should be reliant on a male partner for support.

Further advocacy around women gaining access to policy making positions, closing the pay gap, and encouraging women to use their strengths and voices to push back against the systemic and social issue of DV would aid in alleviating these root causes of the cyclical continuation of DV. Women in relationships where DV is present do not stay by choice, they stay by necessity. Adding more female perspectives to policy making efforts would reflect a more holistic interpretation for how policies and procedures are implemented. Women make up half of the population, but are not treated equally, nor equally represented in positions of power. When societal ideologies remain unchallenged and are reproduced by male figures who do not share similar experiences to women, barriers are created in terms of how policy affects women, as policies designed with male interests and male voices, which seldom translate equitably to women’s firsthand experiences with how these policies play out.

The field of social work can play an important role in creating changes to this system. Initiatives to increase greater education around gender norms and binaries and normalizing experiences of going against said norms are crucial to support change. Social workers can also use education to raise awareness to the broader public of how certain barriers are structurally put in place to disadvantage women (such as the wage gap/racism for BIPOC individuals) and encouraging support and collective pushback from the broader community to aid in calling for changes to these systems and structures. Social workers are also able to aid community members in using this backlash to propose changes to legislation as they see fit from the opinions of a diverse group with lived experiences. Moreover, these outcomes can inspire greater research for social work and other similar goal-oriented fields to explore how other groups experience DV

apart from women as recipients of violence and the different outcomes of needs when women are perpetrators.

## CONCLUSION

The impact of print media discourse on the ways in which DV is viewed, understood and addressed cannot be understated. Language is a powerful tool in society and associated levels of power attributed to prominent figures and vehicles in society give way for discourses to spread, take precedence and promote problematic societal norms. Discourse used by journalists, who hold power by writing for publicly trusted sources, have worked to articulate concerns of DV that serves the prominent cultural norms of the Western society including neo-liberalist agendas that serve to individualize DV instead of addressing it as a social issue, and reinforcing notions that dichotomize those affected by DV as “survivors” or “victims” which when discussed in the articles promoted viewing those affected by DV in light of a singular narrative. It further challenged the power of those affected by DV as these terms are commonly associated with pity and helplessness, creating an image that those affected by DV are incapable of helping themselves when research indicates that when women are given the right tools (adequate pay and access to housing) they can and do leave problematic relationships. A dichotomy also emerged from the discourse in terms of rooting blame of inflated demand for DV services in either Covid-19 for causing increased demand, or in problematizing a long-standing history of neglecting to properly support and fund DV resources. Moreover, discourse used by journalists have also impacted the view of public health measures like stay-at-home orders and social distancing by problematizing Covid-19 mandates that put women at increased risk for DV experiences while neglecting to further improve or enact policies and procedures to mitigate these increased risks.

When combined with a feminist lens, it can be noted that DV is reproduced by the media to be seen as primarily a women’s issue yet, not an important enough issue to consider when developing and implementing public health and social care responses both historically, and in the



context of covid-19. A lack of diverse voices inclusive of transgender women and women who are racialized has silenced the particular needs and responses to these communities. This is reflected in the lack of services and programs that reflect the needs of transgender and racialized women, especially in the case of DV. A feminist perspective on the discourse interrogated, drew connections to the lack of power that women hold in society and language’s role in reproducing this lack of power, especially when it is reinforced by powerful actors, modalities, and institutions. Despite the circumstances of DV, many women affected embody multiple strengths such as hope, conflict management, healing, and pride (Slabbert, 2014) which can be used in collaboration with social workers to create strengths-based interventions. Slabbert (2014) further argued that a strengths-based approach is critical in drafting an intervention plan with those affected by DV. In place of viewing those affected by DV as in need of sympathy and support, capitalizing off of the strengths they bring as individuals, as well as a community, can be a powerful tool aiding in the creation of pushback, justice, and meaningful changes for all affected by DV.

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