"Not really much of a choice": Frontline violence against women shelter workers' perspectives

on police intervention in intimate partner violence

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Abstract

As one of the key institutions responding to intimate partner violence (IPV), the police are often the first point of contact for women experiencing violence. While police involvement is intended to provide immediate relief and protection for survivors of violence, it can also produce unintended negative outcomes, particularly for systemically marginalized groups (Aujla, 2021; Duhaney, 2022; Garza et al., 2022; Wachholz & Miedema, 2000). Informed by anti-carceral feminism and transformative justice, this thesis sought to explore the effects of police intervention in IPV and its implications for social work practice through the perspectives of frontline violence against women (VAW) shelter workers. Four frontline VAW shelter workers from the Greater Toronto Area participated in the research to share their experiences working with the police. The findings illuminated (1) workers' perspectives on IPV, and responses needed to address this issue, (2) the complexities of police intervention in IPV where workers shared what they felt was working and what was not, (3) the constraints on women's choice and safety as a result of police intervention, and (4) workers' call for more options to address IPV outside the criminal legal framework. As an exploratory study, this project contributes to a better understanding of the impact of a carceral response to IPV on both women who experience violence and frontline shelter workers who engage with the police in their practice. It also holds implications for anti-violence efforts in research, policy, and social work practice.

Keywords: intimate partner violence; criminalization; anti-carceral feminism; transformative justice; narrative inquiry

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Prologue

My experience with the violence against women (VAW) shelter work began in my first social work placement. As a placement student with no prior experience in this field, I was preoccupied with learning what I believed were the 'right' things to do and say when supporting women seeking help for intimate partner violence (IPV) both inside and outside the shelter. One of the first tasks that I took on was memorizing a phone script used to assess women's eligibility for services and determining the appropriate resources for support. A standard line in the script was to inform women to call the police if they were in immediate danger. Saying this line felt reassuring for me, especially when their situation did not meet the eligibility for admission in our emergency shelter. Telling women to call the police gave me a sense that I was offering something. It made me feel less guilty about not being able to offer women the support they needed, even though they may face barriers in calling the police. As I continue my practice in the field, recommending police intervention became a routine practice that felt like a natural part of the role. However, this naturalization was challenged when I was supporting client K, who was criminalized as a result of self-defence in an IPV incident.

K was a newcomer woman who was arrested and detained by the police under the allegation of perpetrating IPV. English is not K's first language, so we worked with an interpreter to understand her side of the story. K shared that her Canadian partner sponsored her to Canada and had been the main provider of their household. K has a daughter from a previous relationship and gave birth to a baby boy with her current partner. The partner was physically violent toward her for some time after the baby was born, but she did not call the police. On the day of the incident that led to the police involvement, the partner was being physical with K again, and she decided to fight back because he was really hurting her. Soon after she started fighting back, the

partner started recording her and then called the police on her. After the police arrived and saw the video, they arrested K. Because K could not share her side of the story at the time due to language barriers, she was detained at the police station and charged with domestic violence. After K's release from police custody, she was referred to our shelter. Although the police eventually dropped the charge against K, her partner restricted her access to their newborn son, with support from the local children's aid society, due to her history of the domestic violence charge.

K's experience left me feeling frustrated, not just at her partner, but also at the police that perpetuated her experience of victimization. K's experience, among many others, illuminate the messy nature and complex dynamic of IPV. It also made me reflect on my naturalized assumption on police intervention: people who experience IPV should seek support from the police and those who perpetrate violence should be punished through the criminal legal system by the police. I assumed contacting the police to be the effective and "correct" approach to IPV without considering the complex reality of those who experience violence. Looking back now, I had not fully recognized how the police as an institutionalized protection for women who experience IPV is also a part of the state's mechanism of oppression and social control, particularly for marginalized communities (Davis et al., 2022; Richie & Martensen, 2020). This naturalized connection between the police and protection was also reinforced through my daily practice at the shelter where I constantly reified police power and reproduced the carceral logic of surveillance and punishment that sustained rather than addressed violence, as the root causes to IPV was left unaddressed (Davis et al., 2022).

Furthermore, K's experience prompted me to critically examine the role of the police in responding to IPV, and the effectiveness of this system in supporting survivors of violence.

While I have seen situations where police involvement can be helpful for women experiencing IPV, such as escorting women to retrieve their belongings and offering immediate protection for those who are actively experiencing violence, these interventions are often short-term and crisis-oriented responses that fail to address the complex and long-term impact of IPV on women. Coinciding with research on police intervention in IPV (Ansara & Hindin, 2010; Barrett et al., 2011; Hulley et al., 2023), women in the shelter are more likely to have called the police when they have experienced physical or severe violence, which underlines the crisis-oriented nature of police contact in IPV situations and illuminates the gap for supporting women who have not sought out police intervention. Additionally, police intervention might interrupt IPV, but it does not necessarily end the violence. It is widely recognized in the VAW sector that women are at an increased risk of violence during the period of separation, and there are risks of retaliation against women after disclosure of violence (Ahmadabadi et al., 2018; Goodhand, 2017). Even when people who perpetrated violence were arrested by the police, women at the shelter were often distressed and scared when they learned of their release. These experiences made me question why the police and the broader criminal legal system remain the default and dominant response to IPV, even when they do not adequately address women's complex needs or end the violence.

As well, reflecting on the role that police play in sustaining systemic violence toward racialized communities (Davis et al., 2022; Richie & Martensen, 2020), I have begun to wonder how social work in the VAW sector may become implicated in the broader carceral system through practices that normalize the notion of police protection. Social work is constantly negotiating the contradiction between its pursuit of social justice and its complicity in social injustice (Joseph, 2022). As the profession remains entangled in historical and contemporary

colonial and white supremacist power structures that implicate the field in the ongoing process of marginalization, surveillance, and control of Indigenous, Black, other people of color, and poor communities (Fortier & Wong, 2019; Lee & Ferrer, 2014), it is important to contend with this contradiction and recognize that social work is inherently political, as we operate within and reproduce structural power relations in our daily practice (Duchinsky et al., 2016). With this in mind, my thesis asks: What are frontline workers' experiences working with the police in the VAW shelter system? In undertaking this study, I hope to better understand the impact of police intervention in IPV and how frontline workers' experiences might inform alternative and more social justice-oriented responses to this issue.

Literature Review

In this section, I explore current literature in relation to police intervention in IPV. I begin by defining IPV and the structural causes of this issue and discussing the impact of the anti-violence movement in contributing to the criminalization of IPV in Canada. I then explore women's help-seeking strategies and the impact of police intervention on women occupying different social locations. I conclude by discussing the implications of the criminalization of IPV on social work practice and the gaps that my research seeks to address.

Structural Roots of IPV

Intimate partner violence (IPV), also referred to as domestic violence, is a pervasive form of gender-based violence that disproportionately impacts women's well-being and results in intersecting health, social, and economic challenges (Women and Gender Equality Canada [WAGE], 2025). According to the 2024 Statistics Canada report on trends in IPV, 78% of victims of police-reported IPV in 2023 were women and girls. Despite some decline in the rate of police-reported IPV from 2009 to 2014, it saw a 13% increase from 2018 to 2023 (Statistics Canada, 2024), highlighting the persistent prevalence of the issue. While women are disproportionately impacted by IPV, research highlights its differential impact on women with marginalized identities, such as Indigenous, Black, and other racialized women, and immigrant and refugee women (Alaggia et al., 2009; George et al., 2022; Hoffart & Jones, 2018; Hulley et al., 2023; Kaye & Glecia, 2025; Ogden & Tutty, 2023; Okeke-Ihejirika et al., 2020; Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005). The differential experiences of violence highlight the intersectionality of oppressive structures, such as patriarchal gender norms, colonialism, and systemic racism, that underlie racialized and immigrant women's experiences of IPV, rendering them more susceptible to violence and creating barriers for support seeking and safety (Hulley et al., 2023; Kaye & Glecia,

2025; Ogden & Tutty, 2023; Okeke-Ihejirika et al., 2020; Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005). Similarly, structural oppression such as heteropatriarchy and ableism shapes women with disabilities and queer and trans women's experiences of IPV, contributing to increased risks of violence and barriers in support-seeking (Barrett et al., 2009; Calton et al., 2016; García-Cuéllar et al., 2023; Garthe et al., 2018; Harden et al., 2022; Sasseville et al., 2022).

The differential experiences of IPV not only highlight how women's identities at the intersection of gender, race, socioeconomic status, and other social hierarchies shape their experiences of violence (Coker, 2016; Crenshaw, 1991; Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005) but also illuminate interlocking systems of oppression and domination, such as colonialism, racism, cisheteropatriarchy, and ableism, that contribute to this issue (Abraham & Tastsoglou, 2016; Brockbank, 2023; Goodmark, 2018; Mehrotra et al., 2016; Palmater, 2016). For example, studies examining the experiences of IPV among Indigenous communities draw attention to historical and ongoing colonial violence, such as residential schools and the child welfare system, that disrupt traditional family dynamics and cultural practices and contribute to interpersonal violence (Hoffart & Jones, 2018; Kaye & Glecia, 2025; Ogden & Tutty, 2023). To adequately address IPV among Indigenous communities, it is important to not only improve service responses but also consider and address the structural factors of colonization and its intergenerational impact on the well-being of Indigenous communities (Hoffart & Jones, 2018; Kaye & Glecia, 2025; Ogden & Tutty, 2023). Similarly, scholars have emphasized the importance of addressing structural causes that influence individuals' actions and contribute to IPV, shifting the understanding and response to this issue beyond the individual level (Battle & Powell, 2024; Davis et al., 2024; Mehrotra et al., 2016; Whalley & Hackett, 2017). However, despite the calls to address the structural underpinnings of IPV, the dominant criminalized

approach in Canada frames it as an individual issue in need of criminal legal intervention, overlooking the social, political, and economic inequities that contribute to IPV and shape women's access to support (Abraham & Tastsoglou, 2016; Fraser, 2017). To better understand this perspective, I will examine the history of the anti-violence movement and how it shaped the criminalization of IPV in Canada.

<u>Historical Context of the Criminalization of IPV</u>

The history of the criminalization policies toward IPV in Canada is deeply intertwined with feminist organizing and advocacy. Emerging from the broader women's movement, the 1970s saw intensified feminist advocacy around the issue of violence against women in both Canada and the United States, often referred to as the battered women's movement or the anti-violence movement (Abraham & Tastsoglou, 2016; Currie, 1990; Walker, 1990). During that period, grassroots women's organizations and advocacy groups across Canada organized community-based responses to support battered women through peer support, transitional houses and shelters, public education workshops, and lobbying (Abraham & Tastsoglou, 2016; Currie, 1990; Walker, 1990). These advocacy efforts illuminated the patriarchal social norms and institutions that dismiss and minimize women's experiences of violence (Ad Hoc Federal-Provincial-Territorial Working Group, 2003; Currie, 1990; Walker, 1990). In particular, feminist advocates drew attention to the lack of response to violence against women from the police and the larger criminal legal system and problematized the victim-blaming attitude and the prioritization of family unity over women's safety and well-being (Ad Hoc Federal-Provincial-Territorial Working Group, 2003; Currie, 1990; Walker, 1990). These efforts helped to reframe the issue of wife battering from a private matter to a public matter, prompting greater public and state recognition of this issue. While advocates have highlighted the importance of addressing

the patriarchal social hierarchies that contribute to violence against women, the demand for greater criminal legal intervention was favored by the state and resulted in the prioritization of criminalization in response to this issue (Fraser, 2017; Paterson, 2010; Walker, 1990).

The demand for criminal legal reform to address violence against women was justified and heightened by the first national report on the incidence of spousal abuse in Canada conducted on behalf of the Canadian Advisory Counsil on the Status of Women (CACSW). Published in 1980, the CACSW report illuminated the prevalence of violence against women in Canada and laid the groundwork for the subsequent criminalization policies toward this issue (Ad Hoc Federal-Provincial-Territorial Working Group, 2003; Currie, 1990). The CACSW report recognized the need to prevent violence against women by supporting women's economic and educational independence and improving services for women who experience violence; however, it placed a greater emphasis on criminal legal reform to deter violence and enhance legal protection for women (Currie, 1990). The report's call for criminal legal reform and intervention was also supported by shelters and other feminist organizations, such as Vancouver's Women's Research Centre, that advocated for criminal legal punishment to address the issue of violence against women (Currie, 1990; Walker, 1990). As Currie (1990) explains: "[w]ithin the climate reflected by the CACSW Report, feminist campaigns against violence against women increasingly advocated the creation of new criminal offenses, the facilitation of arrests, charges, and convictions for crimes against women, and more severe punishment of convicted offenders." (p. 85). This emphasis on criminalization signaled a shift in the framing of IPV from a public matter to a criminal legal matter.

Following the landmark CACSW report, federal, provincial, and territorial governments started implementing mandatory or pro-charging and prosecution policies toward IPV in the mid-

1980s (Ad Hoc Federal-Provincial-Territorial Working Group, 2003). The primary objective of these policies is to criminalize IPV by requiring the police and the Crown to lay charges against and prosecute IPV when there are reasonable grounds to believe that violence has occurred, regardless of the victim's wishes (Ad Hoc Federal-Provincial-Territorial Working Group, 2003). By removing the burden of laying charges on women who experience violence, the criminalization policies were conceptualized as both a generalized and specific deterrence for IPV in that it sends a strong social message against IPV and seeks to reduce recidivism among individuals who have perpetrated violence (Ad Hoc Federal-Provincial-Territorial Working Group, 2003). In 1981, the police department in London, Ontario, became the first Canadian police agency to adopt a pro-charging policy for IPV (Ad Hoc Federal-Provincial-Territorial Working Group, 2003). This was followed by the implementation of specialized domestic violence courts in the province that focused on: (1) early access to treatment for people who perpetrate violence through the court-ordered Partner Assault Response (PAR) program, and (2) collecting solid evidence to support a strong case for prosecution (Ad Hoc Federal-Provincial-Territorial Working Group, 2003). These criminal legal reforms have been considered an important achievement of the feminist anti-violence movement in Canada, as they placed the issue of violence against women on the government's political agenda and successfully transformed IPV from a private issue to a public issue that demands policy responses and institutional actions.

As a result of the criminal legal reforms on IPV, there was a growing demand for a multidisciplinary response to this issue, which prompted calls for inter-organizational collaboration among public professionals such as the police, social workers, and healthcare providers (Abraham & Tastsoglou, 2016; Currie, 1990; Fraser, 2017). These calls for a

collaborative approach to address IPV not only underline the importance of a multi-system response to the issue but also the need for social and health service providers to collaborate with the criminal legal system (Abraham & Tastsoglou, 2016; Ad Hoc Federal-Provincial-Territorial Working Group, 2003), highlighting the growing influence of the criminalized response to IPV across public service sectors. In Ontario, the Ministry of Community Safety and Correctional Services developed a *Policing Standards Manual* that requires police services to:

> …establish and maintain one or more domestic violence coordinating committees. The partnership is to be formed with the police service's local Crown, probation and parole services, Victim/Witness Assistance Programme (VWAP), Victim Crisis and Referral Service (VCARS), municipalities, local Children's Aid Societies and other local service providers and community representatives responsible for issues related to domestic violence, including women's shelters (Department of Justice Canada, 2021a, Domestic Violence Occurrences section, para. 1).

The emphasis on cross-sector collaboration also led to the development of protocols and committees, such as Information Sharing Protocols, Inter-Agency Protocols, Domestic Violence High Risk Committees, and Domestic Violence Court Advisory Committees, that enhance the sharing of information and case coordination between the criminal legal system and social service programs (Department of Justice Canada, 2021a).

Women's Help-Seeking Strategies

Women who experience IPV mobilize diverse sources of support to help resist and respond to violence and harm. These include informal support from family, friends, neighbors, and spiritual or religious advisors, as well as formal support from institutions such as the police, healthcare systems, and social services such as women's shelters and crisis centers (Ansara & Hindin, 2010; B. J. Barrett & Pierre, 2011; Hulley et al., 2023; Kyriakakis, 2014; Okeke-Ihejirika et al., 2020; Ozturk et al., 2019). However, despite the prevalence of IPV and the growing

number of institutional responses across public domains, studies find that women disproportionately prioritize informal support from their own social networks over formal sources (Ansara & Hindin, 2010; B. J. Barrett & Pierre, 2011; Hulley et al., 2023; Kyriakakis, 2014; Okeke-Ihejirika et al., 2020; Ozturk et al., 2019). The preference for informal support is shaped by the intersectionality of individual, social, and cultural factors underlying women's experiences of IPV and support-seeking processes. For example, informal support from friends or family members offers immediate emotional and practical support, such as childcare and shelter, and mitigates the stress and anticipated mistreatment or discrimination involved with formal support services, particularly for racialized and immigrant women (Ansara & Hindin, 2010; Evans & Feder, 2016; Hulley et al., 2023; Kyriakakis, 2014). Social and cultural values that reinforce patriarchal norms and create victim-blaming narratives further deter women from seeking formal support services (Hulley et al., 2023; Okeke-Ihejirika et al., 2020; Ozturk et al., 2019). Notably, Hulley and colleagues (2023) discussed the 'Strong Black Woman' stereotype as a significant barrier that prevents Black women from seeking both formal and informal support when experiencing IPV. These examples highlight the intersecting structural and social systems shaping marginalized women's help-seeking behavior and access to support.

Furthermore, the likelihood of seeking formal support services increases as the severity of violence and harm escalates, particularly when it comes to contacting the police (Ansara & Hindin, 2010; B. J. Barrett & Pierre, 2011; Evans & Feder, 2016; Hulley et al., 2023; Ozturk et al., 2019; Puente-Martínez et al., 2025). In their secondary analysis of the 1999 Canadian General Social Survey, Barrett and Pierre (2011) noted that 67.5% of women who experienced IPV sought support from a friend or neighbor, and the least common form of support was contacting the police or court-based support (6%). Women often sought support from the police

when they feared for their lives or experienced physical injuries (Barrett & Pierre, 2011). Similarly, according to self-reported data in Canada, 80% of people who had experienced IPV in 2019 did not report it to the police, with just over 20% of women reporting their experiences (WAGE, 2025). Those who did report their experiences of IPV to the police were often subjected to prolonged violence or abuse (WAGE, 2025). This finding is also supported by studies on women's experiences and the likelihood of police contact in IPV situations, which highlight their reluctance to contact the police and indicate that they often do so only when their physical safety or the safety of their children is at serious risk. (Alaggia et al., 2009; Barrett et al., 2011; Hulley et al., 2023; Ogbonnaya et al., 2023; Okeke-Ihejirika et al., 2020; Ozturk et al., 2019; Tam et al., 2016; Wachholz & Miedema, 2000).

Ambivalence in Contacting the Police

The ambivalence in contacting the police is influenced by intersecting factors that impact not only women's own well-being but also the safety and stability of their partner and family as a whole. Fear of police discrimination and re-victimization, often as a result of systemic racism or a history of negative experience with the police, are frequently noted as the reason why racially marginalized women do not see police intervention as a viable option in addressing IPV (Hulley et al., 2023; Kaye & Glecia, 2025; Ogbonnaya et al., 2023; Osborn & Rajah, 2022; Tam et al., 2016). Moreover, the fear of potentially intensified violence and abuse from their partners following police contact prevented women from seeking police support (Evans & Feder, 2016; Leisenring, 2012). In their study, Osborn and Rajah (2022) also noted that many women who experienced IPV did not call the police because they questioned the effectiveness of police intervention and did not believe it would lead to a long-term impact in addressing this issue or changing their partner's behavior. Additionally, while the mandatory charging policy was

implemented in the hope of addressing IPV through criminalization, many women, especially those who are racially and socially marginalized, do not want their partners to be criminalized or incarcerated as it could create adverse outcomes for their partners, their family, and their children (Barrett et al., 2011; Hulley et al., 2023; Leisenring, 2012; Osborn & Rajah, 2022). This illuminates the fear of repercussion among women who experience IPV and its impact on women's decision-making when seeking support.

For immigrant women, social and economic (inter)dependence with their partners could lead to hesitance in calling the police in IPV, particularly under the mandatory or pro-charging policy, as it creates or exacerbates social and economic challenges that undermine the family well-being (Hulley et al., 2023; Okeke-Ihejirika et al., 2020; Osborn & Rajah, 2022; Tam et al., 2016; Wachholz & Miedema, 2000). Among women with precarious immigration status, fear of deportation and arrest further deters them from seeking police intervention (Hulley et al., 2023; Okeke-Ihejirika et al., 2020; Osborn & Rajah, 2022; Tam et al., 2016). Fear of child welfare involvement and the potential of losing child custody also make contacting the police an unfavorable option for women who experience IPV (Alaggia et al., 2009; Hulley et al., 2023; Osborn & Rajah, 2022; Wachholz & Miedema, 2000). These interlocking factors influencing women's choice to contact the police highlight the complex consequences of police involvement in IPV and raise questions about the effectiveness of police intervention. The question about the effects of police intervention is further complicated by the experiences of sex workers who face IPV. Sex workers often do not contact the police for IPV due to the pervasive stigma around their work and negative past interactions with the police, such as harassment, sexual exploitation, and the dismissal of their experiences, which creates distrust among sex workers and the fear of re-

victimization and criminalization when engaging with the police (Benoit et al., 2016; Klambauer, 2018; Lyons et al., 2017; Stardust et al., 2021).

The loss of control over the carceral process related to seeking police intervention as a result of mandatory charging policies makes women who experience IPV ambivalent about contacting the police. Once police are involved in incidents of IPV, women experience a lack of autonomy in decision-making and the outcomes of intervention as a result of child protection referrals and mandatory charging policies that contradict what women want and further complicate their lives (Alaggia et al., 2009; Aujla, 2021; Bumiller, 2010; Couture-Carron et al., 2022; Osborn & Rajah, 2022; Wachholz & Miedema, 2000). Although the mandatory IPV charging policies were intended to increase women's sense of safety, they also perpetuate harmful power dynamics in abusive relationships by denying women a voice and control over the situation (Osborn & Rajah, 2022; Wachholz & Miedema, 2000). Osborn and Rajah (2022) noted that "[a] woman may contact the police purely out of concern for her own immediate safety but not intend that her partner be arrested. Rather than support her ability to decide what is best for her as an individual, mandatory arrest policies mean that once police are called, an arrest is inevitable" (p. 1412). The lack of control over the outcome of police intervention is especially troubling for immigrant women who may face greater repercussions, such as intensified social isolation and economic and housing precarity (Alaggia et al., 2009; Aujla, 2021; Singh, 2010; Wachholz & Miedema, 2000).

<u>Women's Experiences with Police Intervention</u>

Police intervention as a result of the criminalization of IPV validates women's experiences of violence and increases a sense of safety when the police respond immediately or when their partners are held accountable by the criminal legal system through arrest or

prosecution (Goodmark, 2018; Ryan et al., 2022). Although the mandatory or pro-charging and prosecution policies have been implemented in Canada since the 1980s, their effectiveness in deterring and reducing violence against women remains inconclusive and difficult to measure as a multiplicity of interrelated factors, such as the state of people's relationships, underlying causes of violence, outcomes of criminalization, and individuals' socioeconomic status, shape the future behavior of people who perpetrate violence (Brown, 2000; Ryan et al., 2022). What is more concerning is the overwhelming negative impact of these policies on survivors, including revictimization, inadequate support from the police, and an oversimplified understanding and response to violence that perpetuates harm, particularly toward women who are marginalized based on their racial, social, and economic status (Aujla, 2021; Couture-Carron et al., 2022; Duhaney, 2022; Garza et al., 2022; Harden et al., 2022; Kajeepeta et al., 2024; Kaye & Glecia, 2025; Osborn & Rajah, 2022; Ryan et al., 2022; Saxton et al., 2021; Stardust et al., 2021).

Moreover, as discussed previously, women who are marginalized due to their race, citizenship status, and socioeconomic status face complex barriers when seeking police support. Women's intersecting identities also shape their experiences with police and their perceived effectiveness of police intervention. Barrett and colleagues' (2019) secondary analysis of data from the 2009 Canadian General Social Survey found a lower level of confidence in the police and a lower rating of their performance among people who experience IPV. Notably, Indigenous respondents expressed prevalent negative views toward police response in IPV (Barrett et al., 2019). This is consistent with Kaye and Glecia's (2025) finding that Indigenous women who experience IPV find their experiences invalidated and dismissed by the police and the broader criminal legal system. One of the participants in their study shared that police were reluctant to respond to her experience of IPV and described that "police intervention was only justified after

the abuse she was experiencing reached the point where it was violent enough for her to be potentially murdered" (Kaye & Glecia, 2025, p. 6). The dismissal of Indigenous women's experiences of IPV by the police highlights the interlocking systems of oppression, such as colonialism and patriarchy, underlying the criminal legal institutions, and problematizes the dominant criminalized approach in addressing this issue.

Similarly, police racism towards Black women led to the dismissal and minimization of their experiences of IPV (Armatta, 2018; Duhaney, 2022; Osborn & Rajah, 2022). Anti-Black racism that props up the strong and aggressive racial stereotype against Black people makes police minimize Black women's experiences of IPV and constructs them as potential suspects (Duhaney, 2022; Osborn & Rajah, 2022). Other marginalized women, such as queer women and women who are sex workers, also find their experiences of IPV invalidated by the police, leaving them with dissatisfied outcomes and discouraging them from seeking police support in future incidents of violence (Harden et al., 2022; Saxton et al., 2021; Stardust et al., 2021). The dismissal and downplaying of marginalized women's experiences of IPV draw attention to victim legitimacy that shapes police intervention. White supremacist and cisheteropatriarchal social orders construct the image of a white, middle-class, cisgender woman as the "ideal" victim of violence, who is seen as deserving of protection and support (Armatta, 2018; Battle & Powell, 2024; Bumiller, 2008; Whalley & Hackett, 2017). The dominance of white femininity contributed to the fragile or delicate expression of femininity that shaped the stereotype of a helpless and broken victim in need of help (Phipps, 2021; Whalley & Hackett, 2017). This is also reflected in Leisenring's (2012) study, as police responses to IPV were influenced by the stereotype of the "real" or "good" victim, where women are expected not to fight back or use aggression. As a result, women who do not fit into the stereotype of a fragile victim and defend

themselves when experiencing IPV are often punished through arrest and criminalization (Duhaney, 2022; Kajeepeta et al., 2024; Osborn & Rajah, 2022; Ryan et al., 2022).

<u>The Emphasis on Separation</u>

In addition to the influence of white supremacist and cisheteropatriarchal norms, the naturalization of physical separation as a result of the criminalization of IPV shapes the police's response to this issue. Particularly, the emphasis on physical separation as the rational and ideal response to IPV pathologizes women who stay in the relationship and constructs an oversimplified and linear response to violence that suggests separation and criminal legal intervention as the only legitimate or effective solution (Bumiller, 2010; Coker, 2002; Kim, 2013; Osborn & Rajah, 2022; Paterson, 2010). This prioritization of separation creates both an oversimplified understanding of and response to IPV that overlooks the complex reality of intimate partner relationships and women's experiences. As Paterson (2010) discussed:

> The idea that exit might not be feasible for some women is not considered; nor that some women might not want to leave, but just want the violence to end. Within this context, the leave–stay dichotomy obscures the many ways in which women resist abuse and, in designing policy to encourage exit, no attempt is made to improve the list of options available to women beyond exit (p. 178).

Thus, when criminalization is considered the rationalized and ideal approach to IPV, it limits the options for women who cannot or do not want to leave the relationship and perpetuates their vulnerability and experiences of harm.

Studies on women's experiences with police intervention during incidents of IPV illuminate the revictimization of women who stay in the relationship and trouble the one-size-fits-all criminalized approach to this complex issue. Women often experience victim-blaming from the police because of their decision to stay in the relationship, where the police attributed their experiences of IPV to their "failure" to leave the relationship (Aujla, 2021; B. J. Barrett et

al., 2011; Leisenring, 2012; Osborn & Rajah, 2022). Women also face the risk of criminalization

for staying with their abusive partners. In Leisenring's (2010) study, one of the participants

shared that "a responding officer told her that her arrest was because she had called the police

about her abuser's violence previously but "couldn't stay away from him" (p. 158). This shows

that the prioritization of separation not only limits women's options for support when

experiencing IPV but also contributes to negative perceptions by the police that perpetuate their

victimization. In a similar vein, Osborn and Rajah (2022) contended that "[l]aw enforcement

officers may blame women for not leaving violent relationships or for not contacting the police

before the situation escalated to violence (Gill & Rehman, 2004). In these instances, police

indicate an oversimplified understanding of IPV, one in which leaving a violent partner is the

only conceivable, rational response, and in which women who fail to do so are responsible for

their ill-treatment" (p. 1410).

Although separation is constructed as the normalized response to IPV as a result of the

criminalization policies, the reality is that there are women who still want to remain in the

relationship, but want the violence to end or to get help for their partners (B. J. Barrett et al.,

2011; Leisenring, 2012; Osborn & Rajah, 2022). Moreover, the emphasis on separation as the

ideal response to IPV overlooks the barriers that women face when leaving an abusive

relationship. Factors such as financial dependence, safe and affordable housing, social stigma,

and child custody concerns closely influence women's options when experiencing IPV (Alaggia

et al., 2009; Aujla, 2021; Coker, 2002; Paterson, 2010; Ryan et al., 2022; Singh, 2010; Tam et al.,

2016; Wachholz & Miedema, 2000). When these conditions are not considered or addressed, the

option to separate may not be seen as a viable or safe one by many women who want to separate

from their abusive partner. Furthermore, the emphasis on separation creates a narrow

understanding of IPV that assumes the violence ends once separation happens (Coker, 2002; Ogden & Tutty, 2023; Osborn & Rajah, 2022; Paterson, 2010). However, for many women, separation often means the continued risk of violence from their former partners (Brownridge, 2006; Humphreys & Thiara, 2003; Li, 2024; Ornstein & Rickne, 2013), especially for Indigenous women (Ogden & Tutty, 2023). This underlines the complex dynamic of IPV and the need for a more expansive and holistic understanding and response to this issue.

Colonial and Racist Roots of Policing and the Criminal Legal System

In earlier discussions, studies have highlighted the role of systemic racism and colonialism in shaping police response and perpetuating harm and violence against Indigenous, Black, and other women of color who experience IPV. This underlines the role of police and the broader criminal legal system in replicating the oppressive social conditions that create social injustices and further trouble their role in adequately addressing IPV. With this in mind, it is important to examine how policing and criminal legal intervention are entrenched in historically and structurally created conditions, such as colonialism and racism, and how these systems are sustained and maintained through policing and the broader criminal legal system.

In Canada, Indigenous and Black people are overrepresented in the criminal legal system (Chartrand, 2019; Mensah et al., 2021; Reece, 2020). As of 2021, Indigenous adults represented 4% of the total adult population in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2022). However, they make up 30% of admissions to provincial/territorial correctional services and 33% of admissions to federal custody (Department of Justice Canada, 2024). This disproportionality is especially pronounced among Indigenous women, who accounted for 42% of the female custody admissions in Canada in 2020/2021, and they are 26 times more likely to be accused of homicide than non-Indigenous women (Department of Justice Canada, 2024). While only accounting for

4% of the overall Canadian adult population, Black people make up for 9% of the federal in-custody offender population in 2020/2021 (Department of Justice Canada, 2022). During the same period in Ontario, Black adults accounted for around 5% of the adult population in the province, but Black women represented 8% of female admissions to provincial correctional services (Department of Justice Canada, 2022), highlighting the disproportionate incarceration facing Black women. These statistics not only underline the overrepresentation of Indigenous and Black communities in the prison system but also speak to the colonial and white supremacist power structures that contribute to the over-policing and over-incarceration of racialized communities in Canada (Chartrand, 2019; Mensah et al., 2021; Reece, 2020).

Police and the criminal legal system in Canada were established as a part of the colonial nation-building project to subjugate and control Indigenous peoples and to legitimize colonial violence against Indigenous communities (Chartrand, 2019). What we know as the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) was built on the North-West Mounted Police, which was established by the federal government in 1873 to suppress First Nations and Métis resistance to colonial control (Nettelbeck & Smandych, 2010). The police force and the prison system are integral mechanisms of the Canadian settler colonialism that carried out the state's mission of dispossession and subjugation through surveillance, control, and the dehumanization of Indigenous peoples (Chartrand, 2019; Nettelbeck & Smandych, 2010). These functions of the criminal legal system continue to operate and contribute to the mass incarceration of Indigenous peoples in Canada (Chartrand, 2019). Dhillon (2015) also highlighted the colonial gender violence that over-policing but under-protects Indigenous women and girls, exposing them to greater police brutality and contributing to the dismissal of their experiences of violence. This structural pattern of harm is further illustrated through the epidemic of the missing and murdered

Indigenous women, girls, and two-spirited peoples in Canada, illuminating the colonial violence underpinning the criminal legal system that subjugates and devalues Indigenous lives (Dhillon, 2015; Palmater, 2016; Razack, 2016). Similarly, Robyn Maynard (2017) highlights slavery as the historical root of state-sanctioned anti-Black violence in Canada that quietly continues and manifests in various social institutions, including the police and prison system, child welfare, and immigration, contributing to the ongoing marginalization of Black communities and the disproportionate incarceration of Black people. Thus, the persistent over-incarceration of Indigenous and Black peoples in Canada illuminates the connection between the colonial and white supremacist social structures and the punitive regulation of racialized bodies through the criminal legal system (Chartrand, 2019; Maynard, 2017; Mensah et al., 2021; Reece, 2020).

Social Work Implications

While the criminalization of IPV is an important milestone in the anti-violence movement, scholars and activists (Bumiller, 2008; Davis et al., 2024; Fraser, 2017; Lehrner & Allen, 2009) highlight its role in contributing to the increasingly depoliticized and decontextualized anti-violence work that obscures the need for structural changes. The criminalization of IPV normalizes a depoliticized understanding of the issue that emphasizes responsibilities for individual perpetrators and sidelines structural accountability for unjust conditions that give rise to this issue (Abraham & Tastsoglou, 2016; Bumiller, 2010; Davis et al., 2024; Jacobs et al., 2021; Kim, 2013; Mehrotra et al., 2016). Moreover, the individualistic framework of IPV upholds interventions that focus on addressing individual deviance or needs through social services, such as treatment programs for batterers, crisis centers, and shelters, that reinforce punitive social work response to this issue through the normalization of criminalization, collaboration with the police, and the obfuscation of structural inequities

(Bumiller, 2008; Collier, 2006; Currie, 1990; Goodhand, 2017; Jacobs et al., 2021; Kim, 2013).

When discussing social work's response to IPV, Bumiller (2008) noted the shift from an emphasis on collective consciousness-raising and more egalitarian work relations with women who experience violence to an increasingly depoliticized and bureaucratic response that strengthens state regulation of women's lives. Bumiller (2008) pointed out:

> Now, in many battered women's shelters women are required to apply for all appropriate state benefits as part of a process of showing that they are taking all necessary steps to gain self-sufficiency. These requirements entangle women in an increasingly value-laden welfare program tied to the promotion of the traditional nuclear family, fear of dependency, and distrust of women as mothers (p. 5).

This also highlights the increasing state control over social work responses to IPV through the neoliberal privatization of public services and the co-optation of the violence against women movement (Bumiller, 2008).

Elsewhere, scholars and activists (Durazo, 2017; Kivel, 2017; Lehrner & Allen, 2009; Mehrotra et al., 2016) highlight that while funding from different levels of government is essential for organizations' survival, it also constrains social work's role in advocating for structural changes and undermines organizations' role in transforming the system, which creates tension between immediate social service provision and long-term social change. Durazo (2017) and Kivel (2017) also caution the increasingly individualistic understanding of violence against women that frames the issue through a medicalized and criminalized lens that prioritizes the reliance on individual treatment approaches to this issue through social services and the criminal legal system. This depoliticized approach to IPV fails to see it as a social justice issue that requires changes to social structures, and the normalization of individualistic interventions perpetuates structural violence that is embedded in different social systems and institutions, creating a disproportionate impact on racially and socially marginalized communities (Durazo,

2017; Kivel, 2017). As a discipline and profession that is constantly negotiating its contradictory roles in maintaining and resisting oppressive power structures (Joseph, 2022), the depoliticized and individualized approach to IPV moves social work further away from its commitment to social justice and strengthens state control and subjugation of Indigenous, Black, other communities of color, people living in poverty, immigrants, queer and transgender people, and people with disabilities (Jacobs et al., 2021; Kim, 2013; Mehrotra et al., 2016; Richie & Martensen, 2020).

Conclusion

This literature review highlights the tension in the criminalization of IPV and the complex consequences of police intervention on women who experience violence and the broader systems of oppression. While the criminalization policy improved public and legal responses to IPV and led to the expansion of social and public services addressing this issue, its depoliticized understanding of and response to violence, as well as its failure to recognize women's diverse identities, experiences, and needs, limit marginalized women's access to care and perpetuates their experiences of violence. The colonial and white supremacist underpinnings of Canadian social institutions, such as the criminal legal system, further trouble the dominant criminalized response to IPV in that it maintains and obscures structurally and historically sustained conditions and mechanisms of subjugation and control. These issues trouble the prioritization of criminal legal punishment as an effective approach to address IPV and highlight the urgency to re-examine the criminalized response and re-imagine alternative interventions to this issue. As a profession that is implicated in both the microsystem of service provision for women who experience violence and the broader systems of social control, social work's attention and analysis of the criminalization of IPV is critical in maintaining our commitment to

social justice. However, despite its importance to the profession's integrity, current social work attention on the IPV criminalization policies in Canada is limited (Ryan et al., 2022). To address this gap, my research examines frontline violence against women shelter workers' experiences working with the police. Through this exploratory research, I hope to contribute to a better understanding of the impact of a punitive response to IPV on both women who experience violence and frontline shelter workers who engage with the police in their practice.

Theoretical Frameworks

The theoretical frameworks that inform and ground my examination of frontline shelter workers' experiences working with the police are anti-carceral feminism and transformative justice. These two frameworks emerged in response to critiques of carceral feminism by Black feminists and other feminists of color who highlight the harms of relying on punitive responses to violence against women (Armatta, 2018; Davis et al., 2022; Kim, 2020; Mingus, 2022; Richie & Martensen, 2020). In the following, I first discuss the epistemological perspectives offered by anti-carceral feminism and transformative justice. I then explore the applicability of these frameworks in examining the criminalized approach to IPV and consider their implications for social work practice in the VAW sector.

<u>Anti-Carceral Feminism</u>

Anti-carceral feminism is largely informed by the feminist prison abolitionist movement and the analyses and activism of women of color, particularly Black feminist scholars and organizers (Davis et al., 2022; Kim, 2020; Terwiel, 2020). Also referred to as abolitionist feminism, anti-carceral feminism is underpinned by the Black feminist perspective on the intersection of structural violence and interpersonal violence (Davis et al., 2022), and it is attentive to how the state maintains social control over systemically marginalized groups by expanding its carceral power within and beyond the criminal legal system (Brockbank & Greene, 2022; Davis et al., 2022; Goodmark, 2018; Kim, 2020; Leotti, 2021; Michalsen, 2019; Terwiel, 2020). Informed by a structural perspective, anti-carceral feminism recognizes that interpersonal violence is deeply connected to structural violence; thus efforts to end gender-based violence must attend to and address broader systems of oppression that (re)produce this violence (Davis et al., 2022; Leotti, 2021). In their frameworks of intersectionality and the matrix of domination,

Crenshaw (1991) and Collins (2000) highlight how systems of domination, such as racism, patriarchy, and classism, are interconnected and structurally organized, creating compounding experiences of oppression for individuals occupying intersecting marginalized social locations. This offers a critical epistemological foundation for anti-carceral feminist analysis of violence against women in that gendered violence is no longer viewed as a one-dimensional issue, but a result of intersecting systems of domination (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991; Davis et al., 2022). Indeed, anti-carceral feminism problematizes carceral feminism's reliance on the criminal legal system in addressing gender-based violence, highlighting the ways that an oversimplified understanding of and response to violence against women reinforces intersecting systems of oppression (Battle & Powell, 2024; Davis et al., 2022; Terwiel, 2020).

Carceral feminism first emerged as a theoretical perspective in Bernstein's (2007) article examining the convergence of neoliberalism, conservative Christian values, and traditionalist feminist gender politics in the anti-trafficking movement. Bernstein (2007) explored how the movement created an alliance between evangelical Christians and 'new abolitionist' feminists by conceptualizing sex work as 'modern-day slavery', contributing to increasingly punitive and carceral approaches to sex work and a normalized reliance on the criminal legal system to address social injustices. Through its reliance on strategies of policing, criminalization, and incarceration as the primary approach to justice, the carceral feminist approach promotes a reductionist and individualistic understanding of gender-based violence that obscures structural roots of harm (Bernstein, 2007). This framework heavily influenced the mainstream feminist anti-violence response to IPV, characterized by white, middle-class feminist interests, by oversimplifying the issue and prioritizing punitive interventions (Battle & Powell, 2024; Davis et al., 2022; Kim, 2018; Whalley & Hackett, 2017). Although both carceral and anti-carceral

feminism share the same goal of ending violence against women (Brockbank & Greene, 2022), critics of carceral feminism argue that this perspective often overlooks the historical and ongoing structural injustices that subjugate Black, Indigenous, other people of color, and people experiencing poverty in the criminal legal system (Battle & Powell, 2024; Bernstein, 2007; Bumiller, 2010; Davis et al., 2022). Similarly, Whalley and Hackett (2017) contend that dominating white liberal feminist response to gendered violence overlooks the 'heterowhiteness' that is embedded in the criminal legal system and reinforces the marginalization of racially, economically, and sexually oppressed women. These critiques of the dominant criminal legal response to gender-based violence underscore the tensions in the feminist anti-violence movement and highlight the epistemological foundations of the anti-carceral perspective that situates gender-based violence within the broader and intersecting systems of power and oppression.

Grounded in intersectionality and a structural perspective, anti-carceral feminist analyses of gender-based violence problematize the taken-for-granted notion that the criminal legal system inherently represents justice. Anti-carceral feminist discussion on gender-based violence makes the critical connection between the anti-violence movement and the rising incarceration that disproportionately impacts Black, Indigenous, and other racialized and poor communities (Bumiller, 2008; Davis et al., 2022; Kaba, 2021; Kim, 2018; Terwiel, 2020; Whalley & Hackett, 2017). While this connection might suggest a direct causal relationship between the anti-violence movement and the phenomenon of mass incarceration, anti-carceral feminists caution for a more nuanced perspective on this coincidence by highlighting the role of neoliberalism in the increasingly punitive apparatus of the state (Bumiller, 2008; Davis et al., 2022; Kim, 2018; Terwiel, 2020). Neoliberalism is a set of highly malleable political and economic ideologies that

closely shape our social and economic institutions (Garrett, 2019). In his examination of neoliberalism, sociologist Loïc Wacquant (2010) outlined four institutional logics that characterize this theory, namely: (1) economic deregulation, (2) welfare state devolution, (3) an expansive, intrusive, and proactive penal apparatus, and (4) the cultural trope of individual responsibility (p.213). Moreover, Wacquant (2010) argues that the rise of mass incarceration is not simply a response to increasing crimes in society but a deliberate state strategy to manage social insecurity under neoliberalism.

Asserting that carcerality is an inherent characteristic of the state, Wacquant (2010) posits that "[the] police, the courts, and the prison are not mere technical appendages for the enforcement of lawful order (as criminology would have it), but vehicles for the political production of reality and the oversight of deprived and defamed social categories and their reserved territories (Wacquant, 2008b)" (p.211). In other words, the police, the courts, and prisons are not neutral actors that enforce laws; rather, they are agents of the carceral state who serve to maintain social hierarchies. This critique of the neoliberal carceral state is shared by many anti-carceral feminists who are attentive to how the anti-violence movement is co-opted by the neoliberal state to justify increasing control and incarceration over racially and economically marginalized groups (Bumiller, 2008; Davis et al., 2022; Goodmark, 2018; Terwiel, 2020). For example, Bumiller (2008) highlighted how feminist advocacy that sought to politicize the issue of gendered violence by calling for state responsibility led to the depoliticization of violence against women as a result of the state's absorption of feminist anti-violence organizations. The alliance between the state and feminist organizations has been mobilized to expand the regulatory and carceral apparatus of the state rather than advancing the movement's vision of ending violence against women, as "the feminist campaign was modified and integrated into

state and quasi-state organizations and became part of the routine business of social service bureaucracies and crime control" (Bumiller, 2008, p. 7). Furthermore, within the neoliberal state, funding has been disproportionately funneled into the criminal legal system, while budgets for social services have been consistently targeted for reduction, reflecting the neoliberal carceral logic of the state that prioritizes crime control over social support (Bumiller, 2008; Wacquant, 2010). The role of feminist organizations in bolstering the power of the carceral state highlights that carcerality extends far beyond the criminal legal system.

Although much of the feminist anti-carceral discussion has focused on the relationship between the criminal legal system and violence against women (Bernstein, 2007; Bumiller, 2008; Davis et al., 2022; Kim, 2020; Terwiel, 2020), these analyses are also mindful of the interconnected institutions of power that reinforce the logic of carcerality. The criminal legal system is only one manifestation of structural inequities among many that are embedded in interlocking social institutions, and anti-carceral feminist analysis recognizes that carcerality is both a physical system and an insidious ideology rooted in surveillance, punishment, and social control (Battle & Powell, 2024; Davis et al., 2022; Richie & Martensen, 2020; Whalley & Hackett, 2017). In the context of violence against women, the anti-violence movement has prompted wider responses from public institutions, including social workers, healthcare professionals, the police, and other public service providers that expanded the carceral power of the state and created a coordinated system of control over those who are racially, economically, and socially marginalized (Abraham & Tastsoglou, 2016; Bumiller, 2008; Kim, 2020).

Anti-Carceral Feminism and Social Work

As a 'helping' profession, social work has been implicated in the expansion of carceral power through its contentious partnership with the carceral state (Brockbank & Greene, 2022;

Bumiller, 2008; Leotti, 2021; Richie & Martensen, 2020). In light of the rising calls for

defunding the police after a series of police murders of unarmed Black people in the United

States in 2020, Jacobs and colleagues (2021) refer to practices that reinforce social control and

White supremacy as 'carceral social work':

> "We define carceral social work as a form of social work that relies on logics of social control and White supremacy and that uses coercive and punitive practices to manage BIPOC and poor communities. Carceral social work enacts these logics and practices in tandem with the penal arm of the state, condoning and in many cases collaborating or integrating with police, prosecutors, jails, prisons, juvenile and criminal courts. Therefore, we understand carceral social work as two interlocking components – the deployment of tactics, within social work, dependent on the same White supremacist and coercive foundations as policing, as well as direct partnership with law enforcement itself" (p.39).

Critical social work scholars have consistently identified white supremacy and the role of

social control to trouble the profession's historical and ongoing complicity in maintaining the

racist, colonial, capitalist, and cisheteropatriarchal social order (Badwall, 2014; Fortier & Wong,

2019; Joseph, 2022; Lee & Ferrer, 2014; Pon et al., 2011). Building on these critiques, the anti-

carceral perspective in social work highlights the punitive tactics that are mobilized in the areas

of gender-based violence, child welfare, schools, and health and mental health, to sustain these

interlocking systems of power and oppression and draw attention to the profession's complicity

in expanding the carceral power of the state (Jacobs et al., 2021). In the context of gender-based

violence, scholars have highlighted how carceral services in social work expose women who

experience IPV to greater surveillance and punishment through service eligibility policies and

child welfare involvement (Brockbank & Greene, 2022; Bumiller, 2008; Jacobs et al., 2021;

Kim, 2013). Similarly, Richie and Martensen (2020) illuminate how the partnership between

social work and the carceral state creates 'carceral services' "that replicate the control,

surveillance, and punishment of the Prison Nation" (p.14), and advocate for the lens of anti-

carceral feminism to interrogate and possibly dismantle systems of oppression. Thus, the pervasive carceral tactics embedded in different areas of social work, particularly in the field of violence against women, are indicative of the expansive carceral apparatus that underlies social institutions outside the criminal legal system.

As a critical perspective rooted in intersectionality and structural analysis, anti-carceral feminism illuminates that prisons, the police, and the broader criminal legal system are among a wide range of institutions that mobilize and are informed by the logic of punishment and control to maintain systems of oppression; thus, efforts to abolish the carceral system must also engage in practices that dismantle of broader systems of oppression that produce unjust social outcomes (Battle & Powell, 2024; Davis et al., 2022; Leotti, 2021; Michalsen, 2019; Terwiel, 2020; Whalley & Hackett, 2017). From these perspectives, the anti-carceral feminist framework aligns well with the research on frontline shelter workers' perspectives on police intervention in IPV, as it not only problematizes the normalization of carceral interventions in IPV but also interrogates social work's role in expanding the carceral power of the state.

Transformative Justice

Transformative justice is a theory, a strategy, and a movement that emerged alongside feminist prison abolitionists and women of color's activism to resist and dismantle the prison system and the carceral responses to violence against women (Armatta, 2018; INCITE!, 2016; Kim, 2018; Mingus, 2022). As an emergent framework, transformative justice is an alternative justice paradigm rooted in the understanding of structural injustices and their manifestation in the criminal legal system (Armatta, 2018; Kim, 2018; Mingus, 2022). Still evolving, transformative justice does not have a unifying definition or practice guideline (Harris, 2007); instead, it is underpinned by the abolitionist perspective that seeks to move away from and dismantle the

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dominant criminal legal responses to violence, harm, and abuse while building systems and communities of care and support (Ansfield et al., 2023; Armatta, 2018; Kaba, 2021; Mingus, 2022). In addition to its roots in the abolitionist framework, transformative justice also builds on principles of restorative justice. Informed by Indigenous legal and conflict mediation practices, restorative justice is an alternative community-based intervention to the mainstream criminal legal punitive responses to harm (Barmaki, 2022; Baskin, 2002; Goel, 2000; Hewitt, 2016). Moreover, Baskin (2002, 2016) argued that restorative justice is a holistic and healing alternative to address harm by shifting away from the emphasis on punishment in the mainstream criminal legal process.

While Indigenous communities have been practicing various forms of community-based violence and conflict resolution prior to colonization (Baskin, 2016), the Hollow Water First Nation's Community Holistic Healing Circle, developed in the 1980s in Manitoba, is often cited as an early model of restorative justice in Canada (Barmaki, 2022; Goel, 2000; Department of Justice Canada, 2021b; Spice, 2022). Focused on community healing and well-being, the community holistic healing circle offers programs such as the sentencing circle to provide a culturally informed legal process that aims at restoring the balance in interpersonal and community relationships and reducing recidivism of sexual abuse in the community (Goel, 2000; Spice, 2022). This reimagination of the criminal legal system through the integration of Indigenous traditional practices and knowledge provides community-centered rehabilitation and promotes offender accountability by helping them take responsibility for their actions and redress the harm they have perpetrated, not only to the individual victims, but their families, and the broader community, thus restoring the collective harmony (Baskin, 2002). Underlying this alternative response to harm is also the vision of preventing cycles of violence and harm often

perpetuated by mainstream criminal legal intervention, such as incarceration, which disproportionately impacts Indigenous communities (Baskin, 2002; Goel, 2000). While this approach signified the critical reimagination of the criminal legal process, it is not without its critique.

In examining the impact of the sentencing circle, Goel (2000) noted that while it served as a culturally informed alternative to the mainstream criminal legal system, the emphasis on community and offender healing often takes precedence over the needs of the victims. The focus on restoring community harmony can also pressure victims into prioritizing the well-being of the community over their own healing. Perhaps most importantly, Goel (2000) illuminated the sentencing circle's lack of attention to the gendered power imbalance created by colonialism, which calls attention to structures of oppression that contribute to interpersonal violence. She stated: "the mere introduction of the sentencing circle mechanism, without an attempt to recreate the strong egalitarian society that was once at its base, will not solve the issue of domestic violence in Aboriginal communities" (p. 334). Similarly, Coker (2002) expressed the concern that restorative justice approaches might privatize the issue of domestic violence with its overemphasis on community and family responses without considering how broader structures of gendered hierarchy create patriarchal norms among community and family members that fail to provide safety and support for women who experience violence. Among the critiques of restorative justice is its institutionalization in the mainstream criminal legal system, which diminished the focus on community healing (Spice, 2022) and resulted in an oversimplified understanding of and the superficial take-up of Indigenous restorative traditions (Barmaki, 2022; Roach, 2006).

In Canada, restorative justice has been incorporated into the criminal legal system since the 1990s as an alternative to imprisonment and to encourage the reparation of relationships for victims, offenders, and the broader community who are affected by violence (Evans, 2024; Johnson, 2003; Latimer & Kleinknecht, 2000). Section 718 of the Canadian Criminal Code states that the purpose of legal sanctions includes "provid[ing] reparations for harm done to victims or to the community" and "promot[ing] a sense of responsibility in offenders, and acknowledgment of the harm done to victims or to the community." These objectives align with the principles of restorative justice, which focuses on restoring the harmony and balance within the community and promoting accountability for those who have caused harm (Baskin, 2002; Goel, 2000). While the integration of restorative justice principles to the Canadian criminal legal system signifies the possible shift from the emphasis on retributive responses to violence and harm to healing and accountability-based approaches that support both the victims and offenders, it has remained largely at the margins of the mainstream criminal legal system (Evans, 2024; Roach, 2006). However, outside the criminal legal system, community-based programs have been increasingly offering different restorative justice responses to violence and harm.

According to the Directory of Restorative Justice created by the Department of Justice Canada (2018), there are currently 72 restorative justice programs in Ontario, primarily focusing on offering diversion programs to Indigenous clients to promote healing, reconciliation, and community well-being. Despite these restorative efforts, there has been no significant decline in the incarceration rate from 2001 to 2023 (StatCan, 2024). Additionally, during this period, Indigenous peoples have remained consistently overrepresented in the Canadian criminal legal system (Department of Justice Canada, 2023), highlighting the need to address structural inequities underlying incarceration and the limitations of restorative justice in facilitating

transformative changes when it is marginalized in the criminal legal system. Notably, in his discussion on restorative justice, Jeffery Hewitt (2016) highlighted the hypocrisy of the Canadian criminal legal system by drawing attention to the Truth in Sentencing Act imposed in 2009 that limited the amount of credit that a judge can provide to people who committed a criminal offense for their time spent in pre-trial custody, which increases people's time in prison and prioritizes punishment. More importantly, Hewitt (2016) noted the impact of racism and colonialism in both the criminal legal and broader social systems that undermine restorative justice and highlighted the lack of systemic actions to address the root causes of the overrepresentation of Indigenous peoples in the criminal legal system. Hewitt's (2016) critique of restorative justice in the Canadian criminal legal system also coincides with Coker (2002) and Goel's (2000) arguments that while restorative justice offers a promising alternative to punishment, its lack of attention to structural changes and its co-optation by the mainstream criminal legal system limit its transformative potential.

As one of the guiding theoretical frameworks for my research, transformative justice shares many similar principles with restorative justice, such as its rejection of punishment as a form of justice and its emphasis on creating community responses to violence that prioritize healing and accountability (Kaba, 2021; Kim, 2018; Mingus, 2022). Because of their theoretical similarities, these two terms are sometimes used interchangeably for community-based alternatives to the mainstream criminal legal interventions to violence and harm (Armatta, 2018; Battle & Powell, 2024; Coker, 2002; Harris, 2007). While there are many theoretical overlaps between the two, what sets transformative justice apart from restorative justice is its structural standpoint that recognizes the criminal legal system as an inherent part of structural violence (Kaba, 2021; Mingus, 2022). Transformative justice seeks to not only address harm and violence

at the individual level but also recognize the need to interrogate and transform systems and institutions that (re)produce violence (Coker, 2002; Kaba, 2021; Mingus, 2022). Similar to anti-carceral feminism, transformative justice situates individuals' harmful behaviors within the broader system of power and oppression that rejects the victim-offender dichotomy and recognizes the impact of oppressive systems on individuals' actions (Kaba, 2021). Transformative justice is also considered to place a greater emphasis on the agency of survivors that prioritize their autonomy and needs in their healing journey (Coker, 2002; Mingus, 2022). While TJ is still an evolving framework, writer, educator, and community organizer for disability justice and transformative justice, Mia Mingus (2022) articulates important considerations of transformative justice responses:

> "1) do not rely on the state (e.g. police, prisons, the criminal legal system, I.C.E., foster care system), though some TJ responses do rely on or incorporate social services like counseling;
> 2) do not reinforce or perpetuate violence such as oppressive norms or vigilantism; and most importantly
> 3) actively cultivate the things we know prevent violence such as healing, accountability, resilience, and safety for all involved." (p. 1)

Aligned with anti-carceral feminism, transformative justice is very clear with its rejection of the criminal legal responses to violence and harm, as it recognizes that those interventions are often sites that perpetuate violence, especially toward marginalized groups (Kaba, 2021; Mingus, 2022). Just as anti-carceral feminism's vision is to not only dismantle structures of oppression but also build systems of care, transformative justice emphasizes building systems and communities that foster collective safety, healing, and well-being in the long term (Kaba, 2021; Mingus, 2022). Grassroots organizations in the United States, such as INCITE!, Creative Interventions, Generation FIVE, Interrupting Criminalization, and the Audre Lorde Project, have been engaging in the effort of building community capacity and responses to sexual and

gendered violence. Founded largely by Black and other women of color abolitionist activists and lesbian, gay, bisexual, two-spirited, trans, and gender non-conforming people of color, these grassroots organizations are explicit in their critique of the carceral system and the rejection of criminal legal interventions to violence, harm, and abuse (see Creative Interventions, n.d.; GenerationFive, 2007; INCITE!, 2016; Interrupting Criminalization, n.d.; The Audre Lorde Project, n.d.). Their work centers on abolitionist advocacy, skill-building, community knowledge sharing, and collective capacity building that prioritizes non-punitive harm reduction, supporting healing, agency, and safety for people who experience violence, and promoting accountability and transformation of people and systems that perpetrate violence and harm. In contrast, the uptake of transformative justice organizing is limited in Canada.

As discussed earlier, alternative justice programs in Canada primarily adopt the restorative justice approach that focuses on providing services to help people who have caused harm to take responsibility for their actions through diversion, mediation, and reintegration programs. While these restorative justice efforts are important to support people's healing, their connections with the state, combined with their lack of attention to structural changes, limit their scope of critique for systems of oppression. This is not to diminish restorative justice's value in promoting non-punitive responses to IPV; rather, transformative justice's explicit emphasis on structural analysis and changes is more congruent with the lens of anti-carceral feminism and the focus of my thesis. Grounding this research in the transformative justice perspective allows me to focus on both the individual and the structural, and to consider whether, and how, police and social work interventions adequately address immediate harms and prevent future violence. Transformative justice also complements anti-carceral feminism as it provides a framework for

(re)imagining alternatives to the mainstream carceral responses to IPV that are attentive to power structures embedded in systems and institutions.

<u>Application of Theories</u>

The frameworks of anti-carceral feminism and transformative justice have inspired and informed this thesis. In particular, the lens of anti-carceral feminism helped me confront the normalization of police intervention in IPV and the broader inequities that are sustained and maintained by the criminal legal system. It also allowed me to draw connections between different systems of power and oppression and examine their implications for the social work profession. By interrogating the logic of carcerality that has been so ingrained in our social institutions and social norms, we can expose the systems and values that prop up carceral power and reimagine a system that prioritizes care rather than punishment. The hope for a care-centered system inspired by anti-carceral feminism informed my research question on exploring frontline shelter workers' experiences and perspectives of police intervention in IPV.

Transformative justice often occurs in anti-carceral feminist discussions as an alternative to the criminal legal intervention to gendered and sexual violence (Ansfield et al., 2023; Kaba, 2021; Kim, 2018; Taylor, 2018; Terwiel, 2020), as it offers practical considerations, such as community organizing and capacity building, to realize the anti-carceral feminist vision of abolishing carceral control and oppressive structures. These considerations are also helpful in exploring current social work responses to the criminalization of IPV, and, more specifically, police interventions. This perspective allows me to (re)imagine the possibilities of non-punitive responses to IPV with frontline workers that attend to the intersecting structures of oppression that contribute to and intensify carceral control from the state. In addition, it provides a lens for illuminating promising transformative frontline practices that exist within anti-violence

organizations, which expands the possibilities of a transformative justice-oriented social work praxis and strengthens the profession's social justice toolkit.

Combining anti-carceral feminism and transformative justice, my thesis follows the critical social science paradigm that attends to the impact of the social-political context on social relations and facilitates discussions on the need for systemic changes (Neuman, 1997). These characteristics are evident in my methodology and methods that guide the processes of research design, data collection, and data analysis. While these two frameworks are instrumental in informing the thesis, they are not without limitations. As anti-carceral feminism and transformative justice are critical of punitive interventions to IPV, it could lead to the denigration of individual workers who are in favor of punishment and obscure the impact of broader social structures on naturalizing punishment as a legitimate approach to justice. To mitigate the potential for scapegoating individual workers for structural inequities, it is important to ground my analysis in the fundamental principle of anti-carceral feminism that emphasizes the need to connect individuals' actions to structures of power and oppression. The attention to both micro and macro levels of analysis also helps to ground my thesis in a place of critical exploration and (re)imagination of systemic responses to violence against women that moves beyond the critique of individual workers.

Methodology

In this section, I discuss narrative inquiry as my methodological choice for this thesis. I begin by explaining how I understand narrative inquiry and the research paradigms that underpin this methodology. I then outline the characteristics that stood out for me and reflect on their relevance for and influence on the research process. Finally, I consider the congruence of narrative inquiry with my theoretical frameworks and the justice-oriented social work value.

What is Narrative Inquiry

To gain insights into frontline VAW shelter workers' experience working with the police, I chose narrative inquiry as the methodological underpinning of this study. Narrative inquiry, as both the phenomenon under study and the method through which the study is carried out is an approach of understanding and inquiring people's lived experiences through stories (Clandinin, 2006, 2013). Story lies at the heart of narrative inquiry as it centers on the idea that people live storied lives; namely, we create stories about our lives, and these stories, in turn, shape how we understand and live our lives (Bochner & Riggs, 2014; Clandinin, 2013; Pino Gavidia & Adu, 2022). More importantly, narrative inquiry is attentive to the multiple and intersecting systems that often shape not only our personal stories but also social, cultural, and institutional stories (Bochner & Riggs, 2014; Clandinin, 2013). Clandinin (2013) also emphasized that we do not live in isolated stories; rather, we are situated within multiple stories as we participate in institutional, cultural, political, and familial systems. These interconnected stories not only shape who we are but also how we see the world. As we continue to interact with our changing interpersonal, social, cultural, and institutional environments, the stories that we construct about the world and ourselves will be constantly re-shaped and transformed (Bochner & Riggs, 2014; Clandinin, 2013). Notably, stories in narrative inquiry manifest in different forms of texts that

can be understood through a narrative lens, including spoken, written, and visual materials gathered through interviews, documents, and artifacts (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Riessman, 2008).

Narrative inquiry as a research method rose in popularity around the mid-1980s to challenge and turn away from positivist and realist social science paradigms (Bochner & Riggs, 2014; Riessman, 2008). The rise of narrative inquiry signaled a shift toward the interpretive paradigm that seeks to understand how people make meaning of their experiences in relation to the broader social contexts (Neuman, 1997; Pino Gavidia & Adu, 2022). It also highlighted the increasing emphasis on relationality, reflexivity, collaboration, and intersubjectivity in social science scholarly work (Bochner & Riggs, 2014; Riessman, 2008). Alternatively, narrative inquiry can be carried out through the critical paradigm that illuminates the power structures underlying our social relations (Neuman, 1997; Pino Gavidia & Adu, 2022). The critical paradigm also seeks to transform the existing social order through revealing the hidden structures of power and raising questions that trouble oppressive norms (Neuman, 1997). In reflecting on the paradigm that my study is situated within, I find relevance in both the interpretive and critical paradigmatic positions. To understand participants' experiences and perspectives in police intervention, I need to situate their stories in the social contexts, such as the criminalization of IPV, and consider its influence on participants' narratives. As the researcher, my own values and perspective also shape how this study will be carried out. Informed by anti-carceral feminism and transformative justice, my subjective aim for this research is to illuminate and disrupt the punitive norms embedded in our social institutions and to re-imagine responses to end, rather than perpetuate, violence. In this way, the critical paradigm also informs my thesis, and it highlights the overlap between interpretive and critical perspectives that shape this study (Willis, 2007).

Characteristics of Narrative Inquiry

Intersectionality and Relationality

As mentioned earlier, narrative inquiry is attentive to the influence of social, cultural, and institutional contexts on people's experiences and the stories that they create. This attention helps to illuminate the connections between personal and social experiences and create a situated understanding of participants' stories (Clandinin, 2006; Creswell & Poth, 2016). When discussing narrative inquiry's attention on people's lived experiences, Clandinin (2013) noted that: "the focus of narrative inquiry is not only valorizing individuals' experience but is also an exploration of the social, cultural, familial, linguistic, and institutional narratives within which individuals' experiences were, and are, constituted, shaped, expressed, and enacted" (p. 18). In other words, narrative inquiry attends to the intersection of the individual and structural narratives. It also allows me to consider how the narratives of the participants might intersect and interact with the narratives of the women they supported and with my own (Clandinin, 2013). This brings me to the relational aspect of narrative inquiry. Clandinin (2013) spoke of narrative inquiry as a relational methodology in that the researcher needs to think relationally about participants' lived experiences. The relational lens helps me to be attentive to interconnections between the temporal, social, and structural relations that influence participants' experiences and perspectives of police intervention in IPV (Clandinin, 2013). Similarly, this relational lens helps me reflect on the influence of various historically, socially, and structurally organized relations on how I approach this study. As Clandinin (2013) aptly puts it: "narrative inquiry is people in relation studying people in relation" (p. 23).

Creating Counter-Stories

The narrative-turn in social science research signified the rejection of the positivist or postpositivist paradigm that prioritizes a value-neutral and objective lens through which knowledge is understood and constructed (Bochner & Riggs, 2014; Neuman, 1997; Riessman, 2008). Narrative inquiry emphasizes disrupting and challenging social and human science disciplinary norms that idealize generalizability and stability in research, while also highlighting the political, relational, and ethical implications underlying research in the human and social sciences (Bochner & Riggs, 2014). The focus on lived experience, temporality, and contextual meaning-making underpinning narrative inquiry opens space for "multiple perspectives, unsettled meanings, plural voices, and local knowledge" (Bochner & Riggs, 2014) that disrupt the dominant and homogenizing narratives on the criminalization of IPV. By inquiring into people's lived experiences, the narrative approach sheds light on subordinated meanings and perspectives and creates counter-stories that challenge the dominant narratives (Bochner & Riggs, 2014; Fraser, 2004). In this thesis, my decision in choosing narrative inquiry as my methodological grounding is to examine the impact of the dominant criminalized approach to IPV and to explore potential counter-stories that encourage alternative social work perspectives and responses to this issue. Additionally, through illuminating counter-stories in police interventions in IPV, I hope to enhance the political value of this thesis and encourage generative discussions and reflection on the take-for-granted punitive response to IPV.

The Researcher is Not Neutral

In researching about narrative inquiry, one of the characteristics that spoke to me personally is the methodology's recognition that the researcher is not a neutral or objective observer that stands outside of the research itself (Bochner & Riggs, 2014; Clandinin, 2006, 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2016; Morris, 2001; Pino Gavidia & Adu, 2022; Shaw, 2018).

Researchers, like participants, are also situated within the temporally, socially, and culturally constructed contexts that shape people's lived experiences (Clandinin, 2006). It is thus important to reflect on my own identity and values, as well as how they shape the narrative or stories that I co-create with the participants (Bochner & Riggs, 2014; Clandinin, 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2016; Riessman & Quinney, 2005; Shaw, 2018). This is illustrated in part through my discussion of the research methodology in this section and the theoretical frameworks where I outlined the theoretical roots underpinning this thesis. Moreover, as narrative inquiry is relational, participants and the researcher will both be changed by it (Clandinin, 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2016). This highlights the impact of the research process on me as the researcher and on the knowledge that is co-created through the research.

Researcher Reflexivity

In making explicit the personal, social, and political values and contexts embedded in the research process, narrative inquiry is also attentive to researcher reflexivity (Pino Gavidia & Adu, 2022). This includes reflecting on the connections between participants' experiences and the broader social context, my own values, and how my understanding of the research topic has evolved throughout the process. Reflexivity in narrative inquiry also means that the examination of participants' stories should not just focus on their descriptive content but also involve a deconstruction of assumptions about knowledge, power, and reflexivity. (Hickson, 2016). Moreover, reflexivity is important throughout the research process as it helps the researcher to make intentional decisions, facilitate authenticity, and create situated knowledge that does not assume universality (Bishop & Shepherd, 2011; Pino Gavidia & Adu, 2022). In the methods section, I will detail my plan to integrate reflexivity in data collection and analysis.

<u>Congruence with the Study</u>

Narrative inquiry's emphasis on the connections between individual experiences and social, cultural, and institutional contexts aligns well with the theoretical frameworks and the social work value of social justice, making it a fitting methodological position for this thesis. Specifically, narrative inquiry's context-sensitive characteristic can help interrogate the impact of the normalized police intervention on IPV and illuminate the carceral logic ingrained in our perspective and response toward this issue. Moreover, narrative inquiry's attentiveness to social contexts facilitates an analysis of intersectionality rooted in anti-carceral feminism, which helps to inform a nuanced understanding of frontline VAW shelter workers' experiences working with the police. By being mindful of the intersecting social contexts that influence people's experiences, narrative inquiry allows me to examine how the criminalization of IPV influences both shelter workers' understanding of this issue and their perspective on the role of police intervention. Additionally, as narrative inquiry challenges the dominant discourse and facilitates counter-stories, it not only helps to interrogate the taken-for-granted carceral response to IPV but also illuminates the urgency for alternative approaches that are rooted in transformative and collective care, particularly toward communities that are already marginalized.

Narrative inquiry's alignment with social work's justice-centered value also makes it an ideal methodological choice for this study. In challenging dominant discourses, narrative inquiry carves out a reflective space for subordinate but important stories that encourages discussions and actions toward building a more just society (Bochner & Riggs, 2014). As the current dominant criminalized approach toward IPV often overlook and dismiss the experiences of racially, economically, and socially marginalized women (Davis et al., 2022; Kaba, 2021; Mingus, 2022), inquiring into frontline shelter workers' experiences working with the police

creates a narrative resistance that illuminate the dominant narrative and their oppressive impact (McKenzie-Mohr & Lafrance, 2017). Thus, through the emphasis on both the personal and the political underlying narrative inquiry, this study can make visible the power structures that generate and perpetuate oppression and injustice. Additionally, as social work itself is a highly political practice that is implicated in micro and macro social relations (Baines, 2011), examining frontline workers' experience of police intervention in IPV offers insights into ways that social work maintains or resists the carceral response to this issue. This examination helps social workers to reflect on their role and response to IPV, promoting a critical justice-oriented reflexivity toward the profession itself and encouraging transformative changes in how we understand and respond to this issue.

Methods

<u>Participant Recruitment</u>

I started recruiting participants after receiving ethics approval from the McMaster Research Ethics Board on March 18, 2025. Four participants from two different VAW agencies in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area (GTHA) were recruited for this study. All participants were recruited through emails and a social media post. I reached out to six VAW shelters in the GTHA via email to request permission to advertise the research to interested participants (Appendix A). Four organizations responded to my email request and helped to recruit participants for the study (Appendix B). A digital recruitment poster (Appendix C) was also posted on the social media accounts of McMaster social work student organization United in Colour Student Caucus (UICSC) with their permission. Interested participants were informed to contact me via email to ensure eligibility for the study. To be eligible to participate in the study, the frontline worker needs to:

1. Have at least one year of frontline experience in a violence against women shelter in the GTHA.

2. Have experience working with the police when supporting women who experience intimate partner violence.

3. Currently working or have worked in a violence against women shelter in the GTHA in the past five years.

I emailed interested participants the screening questions (Appendix D) and the letter of information (Appendix E). Once potential participants confirmed their eligibility and agreed to participate in the study, I scheduled the interview with them based on their availability. Participants' consent to participate in the study is recorded on the oral consent log (Appendix F) at the beginning of each interview. Participants received a gift card of their choice after the interview.

Data Collection

Guided by narrative inquiry, this study uses narrative interviews and self-reflexivity as its methods of data collection. Narrative interview invites participants to tell their stories to illuminate the interconnections between individuals' experiences and the broader social context (Kim, 2015). In this process, narrative inquirers seek to learn from participants' knowledge by creating a space that facilitates the telling of their stories. To allow participants to share their stories in their own ways, the researcher needs to follow their lead and be flexible and adaptable in the process to balance the research purpose and participants' storytelling (Kim, 2015). As such, in this study, interview questions are used as a general guide to help maintain my focus rather than controlling the direction of participants' storytelling (Kim, 2015). Narrative inquiry also emphasizes researchers' reflexivity as their subjective values and perspectives can influence

how participants' stories are interpreted and understood (Pino Gavidia et al., 2022). By incorporating self-reflexivity into the process of data collection, it facilitates the researcher's authenticity and trustworthiness, and enhances the depth of the data analysis process (Goldstein, 2017). Next, I describe the process of collecting both data.

All interview data were collected remotely through one-on-one online interviews via Zoom. The individual interviews were approximately 30 to 50 minutes in length. Interviews were transcribed via Zoom live caption during the interview and audio-recorded to ensure accuracy. All audio recordings were deleted once I had verified the transcripts. To collect the researcher's reflexive data, I took field notes during the interview and completed a brief self-reflection journal entry after each interview to help contextualize my interpretation of participants' stories. Research data were stored as encrypted files or in encrypted folders on a password-protected laptop. The research data were also backed up as encrypted files on the McMaster-endorsed cloud service, OneDrive. Only I had access to the data.

The interview questions include:

1. Without sharing your place of employment, can you tell me a bit about your professional background in the violence against women shelter?

2. How do you understand intimate partner violence (IPV), and what do you think is needed to address this issue?

3. What factors led you to work with the police when supporting women who experience IPV?

4. What is your experience working with the police when supporting women who experience IPV?

5. What are the outcomes of police engagement?

6. How might the outcomes be different for you and/or the women you support if the police were not involved?

7. How did you and the women you support feel about police involvement?

8. What, if any, alternative approaches could be more effective in addressing IPV?

<u>Data Analysis</u>

The data analysis process was primarily guided by Fraser's (2004) line-by-line narrative analysis framework and supported by elements of Goldstein's (2017) reflexive narrative data analysis. The line-by-line framework helps me to pay close attention to participants' stories, the different dimensions of social contexts, and connections between the personal and the political (Fraser, 2004), while integrating reflexivity into the data analysis process allows me to explore a more nuanced understanding of participants' stories (Goldstein, 2017).

Listening and Reflecting

Narrative data analysis may begin at the data collection stage, where the researcher listens attentively to participants' stories and takes notes on the thoughts and emotions that emerge in the process (Fraser, 2004). This overlaps with Goldstein's (2017) 'planned reflexive' approach, where researchers complete a reflexive journal entry following the completion of each interview to facilitate a deeper understanding of participants' stories. In my journal entries, I noted the narratives that stood out for me in each interview and reflected on how my personal values and theoretical lens shape my feelings toward participants' stories. Moreover, the reflexive process creates an opportunity for me to debrief and unpack the assumptions and factors that influence my feelings about the interview. I continue to talk about the integration of the reflexive process in generating the narrative themes.

Transcribing and Reading the Narratives

I first compared and checked the interview transcripts with the audio recordings to ensure accuracy. Then, I read each transcript multiple times to immerse myself in the participants' stories and come to a more in-depth understanding of their narratives. Sometimes new insights on interview data emerge outside of the planned research activities (Goldstein, 2017). Thus, I also wrote unplanned reflexive journals whenever new reflections on the interview data emerged. To better understand each participant's narratives, I paid attention to and noted the main points and contradictions while reading each transcript (Fraser, 2004).

Contextualizing

In this phase, I examined the connections between participants' narratives and the social and institutional contexts to see how they interact with each other (Fraser, 2004). In particular, I was attentive to how the dominant carceral response to IPV shapes participants' perspectives and (re)produces 'common sense' narratives on police intervention (Fraser, 2004). This also allows me to apply the anti-carceral feminism and transformative justice lenses and notice the dominant carceral and punitive discourses that are supported and/or challenged by participants.

Constructing and Reviewing Themes

After contextualizing participants' narratives, I identified both common and divergent themes that highlight different experiences with police intervention in IPV. During the process, I noticed and explored themes that both align with and are inconsistent with my theoretical assumptions (Fraser, 2004). To further ensure an in-depth interpretation of these themes, I compared participants' narratives with the reflexive data to enhance the meaning-making process. Specifically, I read the reflexive journal entries multiple times to better understand my

interpretation of participants' responses and how my own values and assumptions might shape the themes that I identified. This process also helped to connect my 'stories' with participants' narratives, which facilitates the co-construction of findings (Goldstein, 2017). Finally, as the narrative analysis process is iterative, I repeated the reading and contextualizing processes, and then revised and refined the themes that I initially identified. This reflexive and iterative process allowed me to thoughtfully interpret the data, and I will discuss my thematic findings in the next chapter.

Findings

Four main themes emerged from my interviews with four participants. These include: (1) participants' perspectives of IPV and their views on how it should be addressed; (2) the complexities of police intervention as reflected in its positive and negative impacts on women who experience IPV; (3) the criminal legal constraints on women's choice and safety; and (4) participants' call for alternative responses to IPV. To ensure confidentiality, all participant names mentioned in this thesis are pseudonyms.

A. Situating the Participants

Participants' experience in the VAW shelter ranges from three to six years. Participants' roles and responsibilities in the shelter include crisis intervention counseling, case management, family court support, as well as community service referrals that connect women with legal, financial, housing, and healthcare resources. Participants worked with the police in various capacities, including direct referrals, missing persons reports, maintaining a safe shelter environment, a volunteer role at the police station, and supporting women's engagement with the police. When talking about their experiences with police intervention in IPV, participants primarily focused on situations they had witnessed while supporting women in the shelter. As such, the findings illustrate frontline VAW shelter workers' observed experiences of police intervention in IPV.

   i.   *Workers' Perspectives on IPV: What It Is and How to Address It*

To have a situated understanding of participants' experiences working with the police, I first explored their perspectives on IPV and what they think is needed to address this issue. While participants' responses reflect the complexity of IPV, most of them expressed an understanding that emphasized the harms and violence perpetrated by the individual. For

example, June shared that: "*it (IPV) could either be physical, emotional, psychological, financial abuse, where it is about power and control, where it's a pattern of behavior. So, oftentimes it could, you know, happen in a cycle of violence.*" This illuminates the participant's knowledge of and attention to the different forms of IPV. Similarly, Natalie shared that "*There're so many different ways to define it and so many different ways that women experience it.*" She explained that women experience abuse in various forms, including physical, emotional, and financial. For Robin, IPV "*comes down to toxic personality*". The focus on individual deviance aligns with the narrative of individual responsibility underpinning the carceral logic to IPV, which obscures the interconnected social, economic, and political conditions that contribute to violence (Bernstein, 2007; Davis et al., 2022). In addition to her focus on the individual, Robin briefly noted the "*cultural pieces around the raising of boys*" as contributing to IPV, highlighting how broader social factors such as cultural norms might shape individuals' behaviors. This reflects an awareness of both individual and social factors in contributing to IPV.

While others mostly focused on the individual, Stephanie was the only participant who explicitly named the patriarchal root underlying IPV. She shared that:

> *I see intimate partner violence as being based on power and control that is sort of rooted in patriarchy and misogyny. So, I think that we have in society these…um… we're taught these views about the place of women versus men. And that the way that we… basically intimate partner violence enacts those views in which sees women as being less deserving of care or as submissive to men.*

Stephanie's reflection on the root causes of gender-based violence demonstrates her attention to the structural impact of patriarchy on individuals' behaviors. Moreover, Stephanie mentioned the intergenerational impact of IPV on both people who experience and perpetrate violence, as she explained:

I also see that it's also an intergenerational challenge, so like, it doesn't just come from nowhere. Often, both the people who are experiencing violence and the people who are enacting violence have seen that modeled throughout their lives or experienced it before. And from there, they have a belief that that's like a normal way to relate to romantic partners.

Her perspective moves away from a simplified understanding of people who perpetrate violence and suggests a trauma-informed lens that attends to how individuals' actions and behaviors are shaped by their past experiences (Levenson, 2020).

Notably, Natalie and June discussed how IPV is often understood primarily as physical violence. Natalie shared that non-physical forms of IPV, such as coercive control, are more difficult for the women she works with to identify, as is reflected in her comment, "*a lot of women until they kind of have it named, they don't know what they're experiencing is abuse*." Not surprisingly, June identified the need to increase awareness of different forms of IPV and shared, "*I think oftentimes, you know, we, or survivors or victims, don't know that they are experiencing IPV until they meet with a professional and can identify that*." These comments highlight how the prevailing understanding of IPV as physical violence can potentially create challenges for women's support-seeking, particularly when they experience less recognized forms of violence. This raises questions about how the naturalization of physical separation through the criminalization of IPV (Bumiller, 2010; Kim, 2013) reinforces the emphasis on physical violence, creating barriers for women who experience non-physical forms of violence. Moreover, the concern around a narrow understanding of IPV as physical violence is reflected in the next theme, where participants emphasize the need to increase individuals' awareness of different forms of IPV through education.

ii.   *Preventing and Responding to IPV*

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Participants' responses on what is needed to address IPV show an emphasis on prevention through education. All the participants identified education as an important approach to addressing IPV, but their areas of focus were different. June discussed the role of education in helping people understand "*what IPV is, what that can look like.*" Similarly, Natalie shared that education for young people can help them better understand and identify signs of IPV:

> *I think education is huge. Again, so just like starting early and having young girls and boys aware of what abuse is, and looking out for the signs, speaking up when they see things that are troublesome and um dangerous potentially. Because I think that there's an increase in abuse of relationships with teens, too.*

While Natalie and June's reflections highlighted the need to broaden public understanding of different forms of IPV, their emphasis on increasing education about the forms and signs of IPV reflects an individualistic approach that emphasizes the observable symptoms over structural conditions that contribute to violence.

Robin, however, talked about the role of education in helping young people address toxic masculinity and develop better relationships. She contended: "*I think that's really important to get into the kids younger in school and to take that sort of, you know, quote-unquote toxic masculinity and try to reframe that for them as they're growing up and creating their own relationships within their own friend groups.*" Robin's response points to the potential of prevention through early education on the dynamics of toxic masculinity that encourages healthier relationship building. Similarly, Stephanie discussed the importance of helping young people develop healthy relationship dynamics through education. She shared: "*I think there should be more education, like, very early age about what, like, healthy versus unhealthy relationships are; about consent, about, well, like, disproving misogynistic worldviews that sort of thing.*" Stephanie's response highlights her attention to how patriarchal gender norms contribute to IPV and reflects her understanding of the structural impact of patriarchy in

contributing to this issue. While Robin and Stephanie's discussions highlight the potential of education in shaping healthy relationships, their focus is reflective of an individualistic approach that largely centers on individual changes rather than intersecting structural conditions that sustain IPV (Davis et al., 2022; Kim, 2013; Mehrotra et al., 2016).

In terms of interventions, Natalie emphasized the role of access to information around the support available to people. She suggested:

> *Giving people options and letting them know what is available to them. So, when they are in a situation of violence, where can they go, who do they talk to, and how do they reach out to someone for assistance. What are the next steps, and just being able to look out for signs early, right?*

Although this focus highlights the importance of access to resources and support, it reflects the attention on individual responsibility rather than the social conditions and systems that contribute to this issue. When considering interventions for IPV, Stephanie noted the need to increase services available outside of the VAW shelter system and offered a more holistic view of women's needs as she shared: "*I think [...] services need to exist for people who are experiencing it, for people who are enacting it and for all people really to have knowledge and awareness of the issue.*" She went on to explain:

> *I also think there needs to be a lot more services available in terms of supporting people who are fleeing, and not just in like emergency shelters. I think one of the biggest challenges and in my work, I see women going back over and over again because there is no available housing that's affordable. Another reason is the lack of, like, I think there needs to be more childcare that's affordable and available. And… a legal system that is better able to respond to intimate partner violence.*

Stephanie's reflection on the need to expand services for people who experience violence also speaks to the intersectionality of challenges that women experience as a result of overlapping social and structural inequities. In addition, Stephanie was the only participant who noted the need to improve responses to support people who perpetrate violence:

And I also believe that there needs to be better support for the men or for the people who are enacting the violence, in terms of like restorative justice, in terms of, like, I would say outside of our current legal framework, that doesn't really recognize that: A, that the pattern of behavior with intimate partner violence, but also like is punitive without actually really being rehabilitative.

Stephanie's comment on better support for people who perpetrate IPV outside of the criminal legal system aligns with the transformative justice perspective on violence that prioritizes collective healing and accountability over punishment (Kaba, 2021; Mingus, 2022). Her attention to the limited impact of the criminal legal response on people who perpetrate violence suggests the need to consider how punitive responses may reproduce harm and fail to address the root causes of violence.

Overall, participants' discussions highlight different perspectives on the understanding of IPV. While some emphasized individuals' behaviors, others pointed to the impact of structural and cultural factors on violence. However, when reflecting on responses needed to address IPV, there appears to be a consistent focus on the individual among participants. Their discussions on approaches to address this issue were primarily focused on changing the individual through education and awareness raising. Although attention on the individual is important in addressing IPV, the largely absent consideration of structural factors contributing to violence risks reifying the carceral norms that prioritize the punitive and individualistic responses to violence while leaving the structural root causes intact (Battle & Powell, 2024; Bernstein, 2007; Davis et al., 2022).

B. Complexities in Police Intervention to IPV

When participants shared their experiences working with the police and outcomes of police involvement in IPV, their narratives identified both the positive and negative impacts of police involvement in supporting women who experience IPV. What follows is a description of

the ways that the participants viewed the role of police, including the positive role they played

and, alternatively, the ways that the police were complicit in perpetuating harm. Recognizing the

complexity of women's experiences with police intervention, I also discuss participants'

perspectives on factors shaping women's divergent experiences at the end of this section.

i. *Frontline Workers' Perspectives on What Works*

a. The Role of Police in Supporting Women

When sharing their positive experiences working with the police, participants generally

emphasized the police's role in supporting and protecting women who experience IPV. For

example, Natalie shared:

> *I find whenever I'm interacting with police, you know, they've been supportive of the women, so the ones that reach out directly to refer, you know, they'll offer to bring the women to the shelter, they'll arrive with the women or women and children, and they'll often have stopped and like gotten them something to eat. They picked up a few items because like, you know, they had to leave in a rush, so they stopped, they got a phone charger, they got a few uh, snacks for the kids, they got some clothes, like that sort of stuff. So that's it's nice because right you get the impression that they really do care, and they were gonna follow it through, start to finish, right? Um, and even some of them who have brought the women directly to the shelter have followed up the next day, you know, just making sure everything's okay, and like, do they need anything else? What can I help you guys with? So that's really nice to see as well.*

Natalie's response indicates that she has had experiences where police have been attentive to

women's needs by providing them and their children with care and support. Natalie also felt

positive toward police who followed up with women they had referred to the shelter. Importantly,

Natalie added, "*I will say I think it bears noting the officers who have done that have typically*

been women. Not exclusively, but majority have been women." This suggests that Natalie has an

awareness that gender influences the policing practices and responses to IPV, as well as how

individuals working within harmful institutions can engage in small acts of resistance through care and relational practice.

June shared the belief that the police have a positive impact on IPV when they offer women protection. She stated that in her experience, "*they do a good job of providing safety plans and keeping the woman safe.*" She contended that police intervention in IPV is needed "*especially when there is physical violence or threats of physical violence, something that the person can be charged with criminally.*" This suggests a perspective that prioritizes policing and the criminal legal system as the primary response to violence, which aligns with the carceral approach to IPV that normalizes reliance on criminal legal intervention as the default solution (Battle & Powell, 2024; Davis et al., 2022; Terwiel, 2020). Moreover, June's emphasis on physical violence reflects a broader limitation in the criminal legal intervention to IPV that marginalizes experiences of non-physical violence (Garza et al., 2022; Kim, 2013), thus restricting support primarily to those who experience physical violence.

When sharing her experiences, Robin highlighted the sensitive approach and interactions that individual officers have with women who experience IPV. She also spoke about the ability of the police to lay charges against people who perpetrate violence as an indicator of a positive outcome:

> *I think because the detectives I work with […] they're very sensitive, the ones I've had interactions with, they are very sensitive to the survivors when they're speaking with them, the way that they speak with them, um, I think that's a really big part. They work really hard to make… as best as they can, um to make the charges stick for lack of a better word, right? Like they lay the charges […] which is, um I find it hopeful and positive that these detectives are very well trained and they're very sensitive.*

Robin's response suggests that individual officers' sensitivity in their interactions with women who experience IPV and their efforts to lay charges are important factors in what she sees as

effective police intervention. Moreover, her emphasis on detectives working to 'make the charges stick' as a positive indicator of police intervention reflects an entrenched carceral norm in which accountability and justice are often defined and pursued through the carceral system. This raises questions about the degree to which carceral logics inform the values and knowledge of frontline workers, as well as the assumptions underpinning the normalized police intervention.

In a similar vein, Natalie shared that police intervention is positive in the sense that it brings justice and validation to women's experience of violence. She explained:

> *I think for some women [...] like it's justice, right? Like there's that element of like they are validated, right? The like, the way that they were treated was wrong, and they're kind of getting acknowledgment about that by the person being charged, um and they're taking back some of their control, some of their autonomy [...] some of their power, right? And so, I think when some... when women don't, I think they regret it later, um, but they don't have the bandwidth at the time to engage in that process, right?*

Here, Natalie described the connection between police intervention and the validation of women's experiences of violence. She suggested that acknowledgment by the criminal legal system through charges could offer women a sense of justice and the opportunity to reclaim control and autonomy. Her comment on women's regret when they did not engage with the police suggests an alignment with the carceral logic to IPV, where criminal legal punishment is viewed as the ideal avenue toward justice (Bernstein, 2007; Davis, 2011; Whalley & Hackett, 2017). This points to a potential binary framing of women's agency in IPV situations. Namely, women who engage with the police can regain control, autonomy, and power over the situation, while women who do not want to engage with the police are framed as lacking the 'bandwidth' to do so.

b. Inter-Agency Relationship

In sharing their experiences and perspectives on police intervention in IPV, participants also identified the role that a good inter-agency partnership or relationship with the local police department plays in contributing to positive interactions with both the workers and women who experience IPV. June shared that her agency offers training to new recruits from the local police department, which helps the police officers to better respond to IPV situations:

> *The place where I work, we have a really good partnership with the local division. So, I think that that has been really, really helpful. The new recruits will come for trainings. You know, we'll teach them about IPV, how to approach the situations. Um, so I do find that when the local division comes to our shelter, they really handle it um delicately. And I think that has been very helpful.*

June's narrative highlights the positive impact of inter-agency collaboration on supporting women who experience IPV. It also underlines how individual police officers' knowledge and attitudes can shape the way they respond to IPV situations and influence the support women receive. When discussing her insights on the outcomes of police involvement for women who experience IPV, June explained: "*I'd say in general they have been positive at our shelter specifically, because we have that partnership. Um, so, you know, the woman would feel validated by the officer.*" June also shared that local police officers support the shelter through volunteering, fundraising, and responding to emergency situations, which contributed to her positive perception of them. While the collaboration may contribute to enhanced support for women, it also illuminates how social work often operates in proximity to the carceral system, which raises important questions about the role that the profession plays in sustaining the system. Near the end of our interview, June reiterated:

> *I'd say overall, I do think having partnerships with the police is so helpful and I've seen that with our local division. Um, I've really seen the way that they interact with the woman has been really great. and I think for divisions who haven't been working with us,*

> *I can see, um, I can see the difference. Um, so maybe, you know, having more of those partnerships with different divisions and teaching them about IPV um, and what that can look like can be very helpful.*

This highlights June's view that partnerships between VAW shelters and the police can help create supportive responses to women experiencing IPV. Her response also suggests the potential to enhance police support by strengthening individual officers' understanding of IPV through training. Additionally, this perspective reflects the focus on working within the existing carceral system and is indicative of the broader normalization of police intervention as an effective response to IPV.

Along similar lines, Natalie discussed the importance of relationship-building with the police when supporting women who experience IPV because it facilitates better collaboration between the agencies and helps the police officers to better respond to IPV situations. She explained:

> *You know, personal opinions aside, we have to work together, right? Like we serve the same population, and police are gonna be likely before us in a lot of situations. So, if they have the information, if they have the knowledge, the empathy, the resources, uh, the education, chances are that interaction is gonna go way better.*

This highlights the interconnected relations between the police and social workers in supporting women who experience IPV and draws attention to the reality that police are often the first responders to violence in the current system. Natalie went on to share the positive impact of inter-agency partnership in supporting police response to IPV: "*They (the police) can even say, like, you know, I'm gonna call this shelter. I've been there on a tour, like, it's nice, I know what the people are like, you know, we've had positive interactions with them.*" This highlights the practical value of building partnerships with the police in order to better support women in IPV situations. At the same time, social work's collaboration with the police illuminates how the

profession can become entangled in reproducing carceral norms when safety and support are primarily understood through the criminal legal lens.

The attention to individual officers' response to IPV is also reflected in both Natalie's and Robin's emphasis on the importance of IPV training for police officers. Natalie suggested that training plays a vital role in shaping police's response to IPV by sharing: "*So, when [the police] respond to a call, um, they don't respond appropriately for lack of a better word, because they don't have that training.*" Similarly, Robin noted the role of training in facilitating a trauma-informed response to survivors of IPV among police officers: "*What I would hope for is a little more education, […] more, um, training around IPV and trauma reactions, so that there can be a little more sensitivity when working with victims or survivors.*" This focus on improving police attitude and response to IPV is reflective of the understanding that issues with police intervention stem from individual officers' lack of training, awareness, or sensitivity, rather than broader structural factors.

Moreover, for Robin, a positive relationship with the police is important because it creates better wrap-around support for women and allows her to better support women in her role. Recounting her experience in the volunteer role at the local police station, Robin shared:

> *With my role now being stationed in the police, it's a little different and I would call it more positive in a sense that I'm enabled to build relationships with some of the folks that I'm working with over there. Um, and so, the interactions can be a little… tend to be a little bit more positive. Um, we have a current case that's quite intricate, and um, like, there's interprovincial stuff involved. And so that they were able to really come together between our agency, the police service, victim service to really kind of wrap around this particular client. So that's been a very positive experience.*

This example underlines how inter-agency collaboration can facilitate more coordinated support for women experiencing IPV, highlighting the reality that IPV is a complex issue that requires multi-system responses. It also suggests how Robin's proximity to the police through her

volunteer role contributes to a more favorable view toward their involvement in IPV, illustrating the influence of personal contexts and positionality in shaping participants' perspectives of police.

Additionally, Robin discussed the benefit of a good inter-agency relationship with the police in helping her provide more effective support to women in her role:

> *I'm in a really fortunate position to be able to build a relationship with these folks in the sense that […] we can speak a certain language. Where I can ask questions of them without giving any identifiers so that makes me... puts me in a really fortunate position to be able to support my clients in the sense that, um, I can get real specific information on their cases without divulging any identifiers so that they're still in control. Um, so it really puts my clients in a position of empowerment and puts them in more in control of what's happening to them, right?*

In this example, Robin's volunteer role within the police station allowed her to build a good relationship with the officers and gain informal access to information that promotes women's agency and autonomy in their situation. However, it also highlights a potential tension in social work's collaboration with the police in that it may facilitate more informed support for women while inadvertently reinforcing reliance on the carceral system as the primary response to IPV. Moreover, Robin's experience underlines issues within the criminal legal response to IPV in that it shows workers or women who do not have access to critical information related to their cases might have limited control over the outcome of their cases.

ii. *Frontline Workers' Reflections on Issues with Police Intervention*

a. Inadequate Police Support

While participants shared the positive impact of police intervention in IPV, they also discussed ways that police intervention creates adverse experiences and outcomes for women. In particular, their stories highlight the inadequate police support, victim-blaming, and the

compounding harms caused by police intervention. When sharing her experiences, Natalie noted instances where women told her that the police showed up but were unable to offer them any support. She shared:

> So, we've had a woman who had called police several times to assist her as she was being abused, and she was told that 'Sorry we can't assist you. Um, because your name isn't on the leases. He's asking you to leave. You have to leave.' And when she's explained the situation, they said, then break up with him. Right? And just left her.

It is commonly understood that women often face intersecting challenges that limit their options for safety and support, including barriers to leaving the relationship (Aujla, 2021; Hulley et al., 2023; Osborn & Rajah, 2022). Natalie's experience demonstrates the police's potential lack of consideration or understanding of these barriers when supporting women experiencing IPV. The police's suggestion for the woman to break up with her partner and leave speaks to the need for more informed and sensitive police responses to IPV, an important theme highlighted by participants in their discussions of the police's role in supporting women. It also makes me wonder about how the prioritization of separation as the rational response to IPV (Bumiller, 2010; Coker, 2002; Kim, 2013; Paterson, 2010) impacts police interactions with women who stay in the relationship.

Additionally, Natalie mentioned that the perceived apathetic attitude of the police can discourage meaningful engagement from women. She shared: "*I've had women say they don't feel comfortable telling police […] details of what happened. Just because they didn't feel that the police were concerned. Um, they felt rushed, they felt like they (the police) just kind of wanted to close the call and move on.*" This highlights the importance of empathetic and trauma-informed responses to IPV. It also aligns with participants' broader emphasis on the need to enhance police knowledge of IPV and to foster more sensitive police responses through training. Similarly, contending on the impact of inadequate police support, Robin shared how she has been

a witness to women's lack of trust in police intervention because their calls often met with inaction by the police: "*There's also the mistrust, like it just continues to build mistrust when calls are made and then they're not acted on. So, you get to the point where you don't really blame a survivor for not wanting to go to the police.*" Her comment suggests a connection between inadequate police support and the lack of trust in police intervention, which can potentially discourage women from seeking police support in the future. Furthermore, Robin noted the frustration some women experience when the police are unable to lay charges against their partners: "*We have some women who come to us and say, hey, what do I do? Um, if I've reported this to the police and the police have attended and they don't feel that it's chargeable, like, what are the next steps?*" This suggests that the police's helpfulness in IPV situations is sometimes associated with their ability to lay charges against people who perpetrate violence. Moreover, it highlights the limitation of police intervention in IPV in that accountability is constructed primarily through the criminal legal lens, and the inability to lay charges against people who perpetrate violence often means that there are no alternative approaches to ensure accountability.

b. Victim-Blaming

A critical theme that emerged from participants' stories on the negative impact of police intervention in IPV was the victim-blaming attitude that perpetuates harm against women. Natalie shared:

> *Like we've also had women say, like it's almost like a new version of like 'what did you do to make him act this way?' Right? It's like, what were you guys fighting about, like oh well, you know, he got angry about disciplining the children. Well, how did you discipline the children, right? And it's like, what does that have to do with anything? So, if he doesn't like the way of disciplining the children, he should smack me, like, what? You know? Um, so again, or, you know, why oh, you've been with him for ten years. How come you've never left before? How come you've never called us before? Well, what does*

that have to do with the situation right now, right? That's such a judgmental question to ask.

This shows that individual police officers might take the side of the partner who perpetrates violence and blame women for their experiences by questioning their behaviors in the relationship. It also shows that the prioritization of separation and the normalization of police intervention in IPV situations create victim-blaming attitudes, which is reflected in how the police questioned women's decision to remain in the relationship or why they had not contacted the police earlier. The way that the normalization of separation perpetuates victim-blaming is also reflected in the previous discussion of inadequate police support, where Natalie shared that the police told a woman to break up with her partner and left her without any further support.

In Stephanie's narratives, she contended that she was unsure how helpful police are in IPV situations and noted the victim-blaming attitude toward marginalized women, such as racialized women and women who use substances. She explained:

> *I've found with women, particularly racialized women. It almost feels like the women are being… Like they're the ones who are in trouble, I guess. Like they're being really… the line of questioning is not trauma-informed, like asking questions that are… Well, like, why did you wait? And why did you wait this long to report? Why didn't you leave right away? Why did you go back? Or like… questioning the evidence they present.*

The police's victim-blaming narratives shared by Stephanie resemble the ones shared by Natalie, and they also reflect the normalization of separation and police intervention in IPV. When it comes to the experiences of women who are known to use substances, Stephanie noted that if they are "*trying, like, communicating about charges they might want to proceed… bring about against their partner, like, they're less likely to be believed, and more likely to be blamed for their experiences.*" The examples of marginalized women's experiences with the police draw attention to the impact of women's social locations on their experiences and outcomes of police

engagement. This will be further explored in the coming discussion on workers' understanding of factors influencing women's different experiences with the police.

In sharing her experiences, Stephanie noted the police's role in creating compounding experiences of victimization for women, as getting the police involved can escalate the violence and threats that they experience and create a more dangerous situation. She also shared that police intervention can be re-traumatizing for women who experience IPV:

> *I think it's also, uh, often re-traumatizing experience to have to like pursue charges. I've had a lot of folks who have pursued charges saying, like, they wouldn't... If they had known how it was going to be, they wouldn't have done it. In terms of like having to restate their story over and over again. In terms of like, the amount of questioning that they have to go through. And then also in the actual legal system, you have what you say in your police interview, but then there's also having to go to court and testify potentially, and then also have to be in contact with the abuser there.*

This highlights the impact of police intervention and the broader criminal legal engagement on women's emotional well-being. It also illuminates the limitations of the criminalized approach to IPV, particularly when the emotionally taxing process may deter women from seeking criminal legal interventions.

Stephanie also discussed how police perpetuate violence against women by laying charges against those who experience IPV. She noted: "*So we do fairly frequently have it where women are coming into shelter and are being charged things rather than their partner being charged. In which case, often the police are quite unhelpful.*" Stephanie went on to share:

> *For example, right now, I'm supporting a client who... she was like, assaulted by her husband and her husband's adult son. But in that, she grabbed a knife to protect herself. And I guess they got a picture of her in that setting, and she was arrested, charged with assault with a weapon, while... despite the fact that there's a lot of evidence of her experiencing violence. But they haven't pursued any charges against her. They also... um... she's a newcomer to the country. They didn't provide her with an interpreter. So, she was like arrested at her school and then... like was charged with assault with a weapon. […] But she didn't even know what was happening. […] And I see that fairly frequently*

with newcomers, like, women, is that a lack of sort of offering supports for people to actually understand what's happening.

Although only noted by Stephanie, the criminalization of women who experience IPV raises questions about how the police and the broader criminal legal system define and understand violence. In particular, the example that Stephanie shared is reflective of an oversimplified understanding of IPV as a one-time incident, which may help to explain why other participants emphasized the need to improve police knowledge on this issue through training. Importantly, Stephanie's example illuminates the institutional marginalization of immigrant women in the criminal legal system and challenges the notion that the system delivers justice to all. Next, I discuss participants' insights into factors influencing women's different experiences with police intervention in IPV.

iii.   *Factors Influencing Women's Experiences with Police*

In sharing their stories, all participants identified the complexity of IPV and women's mixed experiences with the police. When I asked about the factors that might have contributed to women's divergent experiences with police intervention, Robin, Natalie, and June highlighted the role of police attitude. Robin shared that the police's experience in processing IPV cases, as well as their level of sensitivity toward survivors, are important determinants of the impact of police intervention. Similarly, Natalie shared that "*the level of empathy is huge*" in influencing women's experiences with police engagement in IPV. She went on to offer examples of police's victim-blaming narratives that are judgemental of women who experience IPV and highlighted the impact of negative encounters with the police in shaping women's future help-seeking decisions: "*So, yeah, again, the ones who have had good experiences, no issues, right, but the ones who've had negative experience, they want nothing to do with them.*"

Interestingly, when sharing factors that might influence women's mixed experience with the police, Natalie discussed women's previous engagement with the police in their home country in shaping their decision to seek police intervention in Canada:

Maybe they've just, for whatever reason, they've in their in their home country, they've had terrible experiences with police, because we all know how police operate in some other countries. You know, very bad. So, they assume that Canadian police are the same and, you know, it's a realistic assumption because why would you put yourself in that potentially dangerous situation, right? Why test the waters?

Although this example is not in direct connection to factors that might influence women's experiences with police intervention in IPV, it highlights how previous experience with police can shape immigrant women's willingness to engage with police in IPV situations. This also shows Natalie's empathy and understanding toward immigrant women who might not want to engage with police when experiencing IPV. However, the narrative around bad policing in 'some other countries' also underlines an implicit bias that the police in those countries are more problematic when compared to Canada, while overlooking the ways that Canadian police are also implicated in, and integral to, systemic control and oppression.

When clarifying her understanding of women's mixed experiences with police, June noted: "*I guess it would depend um, you know, on the woman's perspective of police and if, you know, um, I think her background would be an important consideration. Her…if she's had past experiences with police, if those have been positive or negative.*" In this narrative, an intersectional perspective started to emerge from June's comments on factors that contribute to women's mixed experiences with police intervention. However, when considering women's background, June focused specifically on their previous interactions with police and did not directly name any aspects of women's background that might influence their experiences. The lack of attention to women's social locations aligns with the reductive carceral logic that

normalizes an oversimplified understanding of IPV and obscures how intersecting systems of power and oppression shape women's experiences of violence (Battle & Powell, 2024; Davis et al., 2022; Terwiel, 2020).

In Contrast, Stephanie often explicitly identified women's racial and class identities as important factors in shaping their experience with police intervention. When discussing women's experiences of criminalization, Stephanie noted:

> *Like I've supported several people who've had charges brought against them. And obviously, it's really traumatizing for them. And I will say the majority of the folks that I've supported who have had this happen are folks from marginalized backgrounds, like being racialized or being a newcomer to the country, or being disabled. That sort of thing. So, I have seen that they tend to be treated worse than like a white middle-class woman would be.*

Again, in sharing her experience on the outcome of police intervention, Stephanie contended that she noticed more negative outcomes for women with marginalized identities when compared to women in dominant social locations:

> *But then when I've supported like, white women particularly, or women who are… I would say well-spoken or more educated, that hasn't been the demeanor I've seen. Like it hasn't felt like they are being…. Like… I forget the word. It's when like being questioned, I guess, in an unbelieving way.*

This highlights Stephanie's attention to how women's intersecting social locations impact their experiences with police intervention. Moreover, in her experience working at the shelter, Stephanie noted the police's general lack of care toward women with marginalized identities:

> *I also find that the way that women, like, the way that police respond to a missing person's report is going to vary by their, um, like background as well. So, like for example, last year, we had a client who was a sex worker who went missing. And I still don't know what happened to her. It felt like we had to keep asking for them to look for her, and even then, at a certain point, they just stopped looking. And that isn't the case with, I mean, with women who have support systems, with women who are white usually with women who like have… I already said support systems, but like less marginalized*

women, I would say. Also, with women who are known to, like, use substances, I see definitely a lot less care about the outcomes for them.

In short, Stephanie shared that from her perspective, police response to IPV "*varies a lot, according to people's social location.*" The examples shared by Stephanie make it evident that women's experiences with police intervention in IPV are not homogenous; rather, they are closely shaped by their social locations. In contrast, the attention to intersectionality is largely absent in other participants' discussions, which reflects the influence of carceral norms that obscure the intersecting structural conditions in shaping women's experiences of IPV (Battle & Powell, 2024; Bernstein, 2007; Davis et al., 2022). Nevertheless, Stephanie's responses highlight the limitations of current police intervention in adequately responding to and supporting marginalized women's experiences of IPV.

<u>C. Criminal Legal Constraints on Choice and Safety</u>

In the following, I explore participants' discussions on the limitations of police intervention in IPV, particularly in relation to its criminal legal consequences, including issues with mandatory charging and the questionable outcomes of protective court orders.

i. *Mandatory Charging and Women's Right to Choice*

Participants noted that women who contacted the police for IPV were often unaware of and frustrated with the mandatory charging policy, as it takes away women's choices and control over the outcome of their situation. As June shared:

I find that it's not typically explained… the process, um, of what will happen. So, um, the women typically don't understand that they don't have a choice if they've disclosed that there was physical violence or threats of violence. They don't, um, it's not explicitly explained that there will be charges pressed against the ex. So even if the women don't want that, that's out of their control. If the police hear of, um, you know, any physical violence or threats of violence, that person would be charged. Um, so I think sometimes

that that process can be hard for the woman, especially if they didn't want to press charges. It can make things very complicated, and it can take away, you know, their right to choose how they want to, um, move forward.

This not only illustrates women's lack of awareness of the mandatory charging policy in IPV but also raises questions about how this policy may limit women's ability to make decisions about their situation. Similarly, Natalie noted that women's choice and autonomy are neglected due to the mandatory charging policy:

Some women regret going to the police, um, and some don't understand that, you know, just filing a report isn't the end of it, right? So I always want to be mindful of that when I explain, um, you know, you're absolutely welcome to call the police and, like, I'll help you with that. It also… that's the other thing that they often aren't aware of is that it may be out of your hands, right? Like if you call police and make a make a statement because some people just want the documentation. Like, if you express that he has abused you, the police then have the ability to press charges, right? Like so not you, you no longer have a choice and that is really overwhelming for some women. They don't like that.

This illustrates how protection under the carceral system can shift the power away from survivors and toward state institutions (Bumiller, 2010; Goodmark, 2013). Natalie also noted that the process of pressing charges can sometimes make women feel overwhelmed:

They want this to be finished, they want to move on, they wanna start separating from their partner. It's a decision that they've made, um and they don't want any additional steps. They just want to, like, get a divorce and go. They don't wanna go to court and deal with the assault charges or, like, have any sort of follow-up.

This shows how criminal legal involvement can create additional stress for women seeking closure to the relationship and can marginalize the wishes of women whose needs do not align with the priorities of the criminal legal system. Additionally, Robin shared women's lack of choice in the outcome of their situation once police are involved.

I've also had women come in and say, wow, I didn't know this was gonna happen. And after they told their story, they spent several hours with a police officer, she got connected with our agency and there were like 30 somewhat charges come out of it and she was

like… she was horrified because she was… just… it basically just blew up her life, right?
She was just looking for safety, she called the police for safety, but essentially what came
out of it was this huge thing that just completely blew up her life.

This highlights the different understanding of safety from the women's perspective and the

criminal legal lens, where safety is to be achieved through charges. It also reflects the criminal

legal framework's oversimplified understanding of IPV and the limited consideration of how

criminal legal interventions affect women's lives.

Further contending on women's lack of choice under the mandatory charging policy,

Robin compared this with the choices available for women when deciding whether to pursue

charges in cases of sexual assault by non-intimate partners:

> *I don't know how familiar you are with like the sexual assault charges, for example, that*
> *that are not IPV related. There's a lot of control afforded to them. They can choose, you*
> *know. They can report, they can get all the evidence to the police. They can even go, you*
> *know, to certain agencies, get like kits taken, all the biologicals done and everything. And*
> *then still say, I even know who this is, but I'm not ready for this yet. And so, they remain*
> *that they retain the control over, you know, um, if and or when charges get laid. Now, if,*
> *for example, the same charges, put it in an intimate partner violence situation, they lose*
> *control of that. So, the minute it becomes an IPV situation, it's getting charged whether*
> *they want to or not, and I can tell you there's a lot of calls while I'm sitting there at the*
> *police station, of people who are very, very upset with the police station calling them and*
> *saying, hey, I really want you to remove those charges and they're like, it's too late, I can't*
> *do that.*

The lack of choice for women in IPV situations, again, illustrates the prioritization of separation

in the dominant criminal legal response that overlooks the complex dynamic and reality of

intimate partner relationships. It also reflects a paternalistic tendency underlying the carceral

response to IPV that sees women who experience violence as passive victims who are incapable

of determining what is best for themselves (Abraham & Tastsoglou, 2016; Paterson, 2010).

Importantly, Robin noted that the lives of people in intimate partner relationships are 'interconnected', which complicates the impact of criminal legal intervention in IPV. She explained:

> There were small children involved and there was definitely a safety risk. Like there's no doubt in my mind that she should not have been anywhere near this guy. But at the same time, their lives are so interconnected, the children were very small um they owned a business together, so all their financials were so intertwined, and [that] ended up really not being a positive experience for this particular client.

Similarly, Stephanie noted the emotional attachment between women and their partners, despite the experience of IPV:

> I mean, intimate partner violence is complicated. People… you still love your partner. […] Often, like the violence you're experiencing, it's not like a black and white thing, so it makes sense to not want your partner to be criminalized.

These examples illustrate the emotional complexity of IPV, where love and harm may co-exist in the relationship. Stephanie's emphasis on 'love' between women and their partners, despite the violence, also challenges the narrow carceral perspective that assumes separation and criminal charges as the best solution, which further complicates women's lives.

ii.   *Questionable Outcome of Criminal Legal Punishment*

An important theme that emerged from participants' stories on the impact of police intervention in IPV is their observation of the questionable outcome of criminal legal response on women's safety, including incarceration and protective court orders. For example, Stephanie shared:

> Honestly, a lot of women also don't believe that [police involvement] actually makes a significant difference. And that's something I've seen…where, like… okay, the partner might be charged and there might be conditions, but the partner doesn't really care about breaching those conditions. Where, like oftentimes, I see there's …. I'm not saying that I

think incarceration is the solution here, but like that people will breach over and over again. And that there's no real consequence for that.

This suggests that criminal legal punishment does not guarantee safety. It also illustrates that the criminal legal punishment of people who perpetrate violence through criminal charges is inadequate in addressing IPV and supporting women's long-term well-being. Stephanie went on to explain:

And then they continually get released without any real communication or protection for the women, sometimes they get released without even being told. Like the women don't get told that their ex-partner is getting released. So, it has the potential to just endanger them more.

Similarly, while June sees police intervention and no-contact orders are needed in IPV because they help "*to keep the woman safe*", she also discussed the limitation of protective court orders in addressing IPV:

I've also heard, you know, there is this no-contact order, but sometimes the partner won't respect that. And that can be scary and very dangerous. And sometimes there's very limited that the police can do, um, because they can charge you and […] there's a no-contact issued. But if the ex-partner doesn't respect that, um, you know, he can still come and uh commit harm. So that can be quite scary as well. And I know some women, um, have felt kind of helpless in the situation.

June's response illustrates the gap between the intention and impact of criminal legal interventions in addressing IPV. While protective court orders are intended to protect women, their effectiveness is unreliable, highlighting the need for alternative approaches that hold people who perpetrate violence accountable and better support women's well-being.

When sharing her experiences, Robin also voiced her concerns about the effectiveness of court orders in ensuring women's safety: "*As we all know, a restraining order is just a piece of paper. They don't always… it doesn't always do its job.*" She went on to share:

> *You've got people who are perhaps more embedded in a criminal sort of lifestyle who don't really care. It doesn't… a piece of paper, they're already breaking other laws. What's to stop them? Um, you know, from uh… the restraining order is not… if they're not afraid of breaking any other laws, what's this restraining order going to deter them?*

This suggests that the role of criminal legal punishment in deterring future violence is limited. It also problematizes the overreliance on carceral responses and highlights the need to expand responses to IPV beyond the criminal legal system to better address this issue and support women's safety and well-being. In short, participants' concerns around the effectiveness of criminal legal punishment highlight the limitations in the dominant carceral response to IPV and raise questions about its dominance in addressing this issue.

D. Frontline Workers' Call for Alternative Responses to IPV

One of the objectives of this thesis is to explore potential alternative approaches to police intervention in IPV. Importantly, all participants shared that while police are needed to offer protection in violent situations, women need to have more options when it comes to dealing with IPV. For example, Stephanie discussed:

> *I think oftentimes There's like a wish that there was a system outside of policing that existed to A: that would help like protect women, and also sort of stop… again for like accountability, I guess. Because, like all the factors I talked about earlier about things like the difficulty of relationships and loving partners but also like because of the re-traumatization and because of the potentially being mistreated. I think… I wish there was a system that exists outside of the police that had any ability to, I guess, really respond. And I don't think that's like an isolated case. I think that like… I've talked to other workers who wish that was the case as well.*

This highlights not only the need to have more options for women but also alternative options outside of the carceral system. Stephanie went on to share:

> *As well as like clients who… they feel like almost forced to have police in their life if… Well, either it's a choice of like do I want to be safe potentially, or do I want to have police involved? And that's not really much of a choice.*

When police intervention is the only route to safety, then women are forced to choose between personal safety and unwanted police involvement, which also perpetuates experiences of harm. Women's limited options for safety in IPV also highlight how the prioritization of the carceral approach restricts women's autonomy. The feeling of a lack of alternative options for women who experience IPV is also shared by Robin:

> *I, you know, as an IPV worker and as a staunch feminist, I would like to say yes [...] take them away, get you safe, throw away the key, but is [police intervention] really gonna be the most supportive thing for a client, right? Like, they need to be able to be given the options and the choices.*

Similarly, June shared:

> *I don't think that police always need to be involved, but I do think that oftentimes police are involved and maybe the neighbor called police, maybe the woman called herself or even sometimes the partner calls, um, and tries to say that he was the one who was assaulted um so that does happen as well.*

Although police are not always necessary in IPV, how common it is to have the police involved highlights the normalization of police intervention and the lack of alternative options.

When discussing possible alternative responses to IPV, participants' narratives highlighted the need to expand social service responses to this issue and the potential of the restorative justice approach. Sharing her thoughts on alternatives to police intervention, Natalie noted:

> *So, I think what would be really helpful is what they started doing with um like for calls that, um, involve like mental health crises um, if there was someone who could accompany police on calls. right? [...] I think if, um, you know, rather than an officer reaching out, if there were like kind of um an IPV specialist officer. [...] someone who has the ability to kind of provide the education on what options are available and someone who's not in... like not in a police uniform.*

She went on to share that police in uniforms can be intimidating as they carry guns. Natalie's response suggests a more integrated collaboration between social work and the criminal legal

system, where social workers will intervene in place of the police. It also underlines the need for educating individuals and improving access to information about options in response to IPV, which aligns with the depoliticized approach that responsibilizes the individual for managing their own behaviors and risks (Brockbank & Greene, 2022; Liebenberg et al., 2015). Further, the suggestion to enhance social work's engagement with the criminal legal system in response to IPV does not address the adverse impact and consequences of criminal legal intervention on women that were discussed earlier. By suggesting a closer collaboration with the police through the role of IPV specialists, Natalie's response also raises questions about how social work can be further incorporated into the carceral system in ways that strengthen the carceral system and constrain the profession's capacity to pursue social justice (Richie & Martensen, 2020). Alternatively, reflecting on women's diverse needs, June noted:

> *I mean, I do think working with organizations that provide specialized services. Um is very helpful. So, the women don't necessarily need to go to an emergency shelter. Um, you know, they can… our organization, for example, and other organizations, offer other supports so it can help them, you know, with finding a new apartment or um, you know, other supports that's not necessarily shelter […] you know, specialized services that provide wrap-around supports um seeing what it is that the woman needs help with um, and then kind of going based off of what the woman is looking for.*

This highlights the need for expansive support for women who experience IPV, particularly outside the emergency shelter system. Additionally, June's focus on expanding and improving services for women experiencing IPV reflects the emphasis of an individualistic approach that prioritizes service provision while overlooking the need for structural changes (Battle & Powell, 2024; Davis et al., 2022; Lehrner & Allen, 2009).

When reflecting on alternatives to police intervention, Robin noted the role of women's shelters and the alternative justice response:

> *I don't know, you just try to get contact with your local like women's shelter at that point. Like that's really all I can say, all I know of... I wish I had more answers to that. I know that there are some, um, alternative justice through like Indigenous sources. I just don't know very much about that.*

This illuminates the lack of options available for women who experience IPV when all they have is either the police or the shelter. While Robin mentioned the Indigenous justice approach to IPV, her limited knowledge of it may suggest that alternative justice responses remain at the margins of mainstream social work anti-violence efforts.

Finally, Stephanie offered a more nuanced consideration for alternatives to police by highlighting the need to expand current interventions within the criminal legal framework and to implement the Indigenous restorative justice approach more widely. She contended:

> *I don't fully know, to be honest. I don't have the answers. I wish there was like some sort of crisis response that…It's challenging, I guess, in some situations, I feel like it is necessary to like where there is like a grave danger and that police get involved. But like, in other cases I wish there was… like a nonviolent crisis response team almost that could, like, go respond to just domestic disputes or that people could go to for support that didn't rely on the legal system and police to sort of to like enforce things and also to respond to things. Like... having a person come in with a gun doesn't usually like de-escalate situations.*

Stephanie recognizes the different levels of violence and the differential responses required in IPV situations. While she acknowledges that police may be needed in high-risk situations, she also highlights the need for more non-carceral options and questions the effectiveness of police intervention in situations that can be addressed through 'nonviolent crisis response.' Stephanie then went on to discuss the restorative justice response in IPV:

> *I think [an organization] on Six Nations Reserve, they have the shelter where families can live together. Like including the perpetrator of violence and I think that's that sort of restorative justice sort of program where people can actually be like work on changing the dynamics of a relationship. I wish that was more available.*

This illuminates the need for alternative approaches to IPV that recognize the complex dynamic of this issue and promote collective healing. Stephanie's reflection also underlines the importance of non-carceral responses to IPV, where the primary goal is not punishing people who perpetrated violence but supporting accountability, meaningful changes, and healing for everyone involved (Coker, 2002; Kaba, 2021; Mingus, 2022).

Participants' reflections on alternatives for police intervention in IPV draw attention to the multi-dimensional responses needed to address women's various needs. However, most participants' discussions focus on changing practice responses within the criminal legal system, rather than challenging the criminalization of IPV or considering non-carceral alternatives. This could potentially be explained by the insidious influence of carceral logic that depoliticizes the issue of IPV and normalizes criminal legal responses to violence (Davis et al., 2022; Goodmark, 2018; Leotti, 2021). Nonetheless, participants shared a consensus that there needs to be more options for women outside of the criminal legal framework through expanded and alternative social service responses.

In this section, I have explored frontline VAW shelter workers' perspectives and experiences of police intervention in IPV. By contextualizing participants' discussions within the dominant carceral response to IPV, the findings suggest an insidious influence of carceral norms in how this issue is understood and how police intervention is perceived. In addition, the findings illuminate the complexity of police intervention in IPV as emerged from participants' narratives. These narratives add nuance to the dominant carceral discourse surrounding IPV by highlighting how police involvement can be helpful in some cases yet harmful in others. In the next section, I discuss the narrative threads that speak to the limitations of carceral protection in response to IPV and consider their implications for social work practice and values.

Discussion

By exploring frontline VAW shelter workers' experiences working with the police, this thesis sought to facilitate a better understanding of the impact of the punitive response to IPV on both women who experience violence and frontline shelter workers who engage with the police in their practice. Guided by anti-carceral feminism and transformative justice frameworks, this study also aimed to facilitate reflections on how frontline workers, including social workers, become entangled in the carceral response to IPV through their collaboration with the police, and to consider the implications of this involvement for the profession's values. Moreover, by engaging in dialogues with frontline VAW shelter workers on alternative interventions to IPV, I hoped to expand our imagination and response to violence that moves beyond the carceral framework. The findings in this study highlight the complex realities of police intervention, where their involvement may be necessary at times but also produces adverse consequences for women's well-being, thus complicating the normalization of criminalization as the default response to IPV. Additionally, the findings highlight how carceral logics are unintentionally reproduced through participants' individualized understandings of IPV and their largely taken-for-granted perspective of police intervention as the default response.

In this chapter, I discuss four threads that were amplified throughout my analysis and in relation to the theoretical frameworks, relevant literature, and the objective of the research. These include (1) the entrenched carceral norms that influence perspectives on police intervention in IPV, (2) the limitations of carceral protection and how it creates unequal power relations between the state and women impacted by violence, (3) how social work is entangled in carceral logics within the neoliberal context, and (4) the tensions and possibilities in imagining responses

outside of the carceral system. Following this discussion, I consider the implications and limitations of this thesis in relation to IPV policy, social work practice, and future research.

<u>Entrenched Carceral Norms</u>

Participants' discussions on IPV and interventions to address this issue ranged from individualistic to structural perspectives. June, Natalie, and Robin's responses tended to center on individual changes and behaviors, while Stephanie often expressed a more structural understanding of IPV. For example, June and Natalie spoke about the varying forms of IPV experienced by women, focusing on how women recognize and respond to different forms of violence, while Robin largely attributed the issue to individuals' "toxic personality." In contrast, Stephanie discussed the structural factor of patriarchy in shaping individuals' behaviors and relationship dynamics. Across these varied perspectives, the influence of carceral norms stands out, particularly in participants' assumptions that police intervention equals justice, their emphasis on individual responsibility, and the general absence of an intersectional consideration.

When discussing police's positive impact and their role in addressing IPV, participants' responses largely reflected the entrenched carceral norms that frame this issue through the lens of crime and punishment (Bernstein, 2007; Bumiller, 2008; Davis et al., 2022; Kim, 2018). These normative carceral discourses often emerge when participants take for granted the idea that police inherently offer protection and that criminal legal intervention is synonymous with justice. This was evident when June highlighted police's important role in providing women with protection and safety, and when Robin emphasized the ability of the police to press criminal charges against people who perpetrated violence. While these examples suggest that the police can play a positive role in supporting women who experience IPV, they also reflect the broader carceral logic that normalizes criminal legal punishment as the solution to social issues (Davis et

al., 2022; Goodmark, 2018; Leotti, 2021) and renders alternative responses to violence appear unthinkable (Kaba, 2021). Similar narratives also emerge in Natalie's contention that police intervention offers justice and validation to women experiencing IPV. However, this perspective is complicated and contrasted by participants' concerns with the police and the broader criminal legal system, including the harms (re)produced by these systems and their limited effectiveness in addressing IPV. These concerns are well-documented in current literature that highlights the adverse consequences of police involvement in IPV, particularly toward those who are marginalized (Aujla, 2021; Duhaney, 2022; Garza et al., 2022; Harden et al., 2022; Kajeepeta et al., 2024; Kaye & Glecia, 2025; Stardust et al., 2021). Despite the limitations of police intervention in IPV, the way that it is still constructed as the primary route to justice reveals how carceral norms deeply shape our responses to violence.

Furthermore, the carceral influence evident in participants' normalization of criminal legal response to IPV illuminates the reality that carcerality manifests both physically through the criminal legal system, such as prisons and policing, and ideologically through how we understand and respond to violence and harm (Davis et al., 2022; Richie & Martensen, 2020; Whalley & Hackett, 2017). This is reflected in participants' largely taken-for-granted assumption that police intervention brings justice and protection for women, even when their own experiences underline its limitations. For example, although June and Robin expressed concerns about the effectiveness of protective court orders in deterring future violence and ensuring women's safety, they left the carceral response to this issue unchallenged. What is missing from this normalized carceral response to IPV is the ways that violence is also inherent in the criminal legal system and that punishment through this system perpetuates, rather than addresses or upends violence (Garner et al., 2021; Goodmark, 2018; Kaba, 2021; Mingus, 2022). In

particular, the prison system proliferates violence and patriarchal norms where the assertion of masculinity and domination becomes the necessity for survival, and people who are incarcerated are regularly exposed to violence and sexual assaults (Armatta, 2018; Davis, 2011; Goodmark, 2018). As Goodmark (2018) cautioned, the violent norms that individuals learn in the prison system will follow them into their future relationships and communities that perpetuate the cycle of interpersonal violence.

Additionally, participants' belief that criminal legal punishment is a necessary response to IPV suggests an emphasis on individual responsibility that obscures structural accountability for violence. An important tenet of anti-carceral feminism is its attention to the intersection of state and interpersonal violence (Davis et al., 2022). However, when carceral intervention through policing is framed as the normative response to IPV, it constructs this issue as primarily an individual problem that needs to be addressed through the criminal legal system. This simultaneously distances the state from violence while protecting the white supremacist, cisheteropatriarchal, and capitalist social hierarchies that create the conditions for violence (Davis et al., 2022; Durazo, 2017). Further, the dominant carceral narratives confine understandings of IPV within a depoliticized framework and disconnect them from other forms of social injustices (Davis et al., 2022; Durazo, 2017; Richie & Martensen, 2020). This is reflected in June, Natalie, and Robin's individualistic perspectives on IPV, where they focused on individuals' tactics of violence or personality. It is also evident in participants' suggestions for educational responses, such as increasing awareness of signs of IPV and promoting positive relationship building. While important, the emphasis on education risks locating the problem within the individual and obscuring structural factors that create the conditions for this issue. Stephanie was the only participant who explicitly acknowledged structural contributors to IPV,

stating that the issue is "rooted in patriarchy and misogyny." Her response aligns with the structural perspective underlying anti-carceral feminism that attends to how individuals' acts of gender-based violence are interconnected with other structures of domination, such as colonialism, white supremacy, and capitalism (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991; Davis et al., 2022; Kaba, 2021). Despite this, within the dominant carceral framework, IPV continues to be narrowly conceptualized as an individual issue disconnected from broader systems of oppression (Davis et al., 2022; Durazo, 2017; Richie & Martensen, 2020).

Moreover, the entrenched carceral logic in response to IPV is evident in participants' lack of consideration of women's social locations in impacting their experiences and outcomes with police intervention. As the carceral framework prioritizes an oversimplified understanding of IPV (Battle & Powell, 2024; Davis et al., 2022; Kim, 2018; Whalley & Hackett, 2017), participants' discussions on the role of police in protecting women and responding to violence largely evade an intersectional analysis of how race, class, citizenship status, and other social locations shape women's experiences with the criminal legal system and their access to support. Although I did not specifically ask the question of how social locations might influence women's experiences with the police, silence on these factors suggests that for the participants in this study, this consideration was not front and center.. The exception was Stephanie, who was attentive to how intersecting positionalities affect women's experiences with the police. This general absence of an intersectional analysis among the participants reflects the dominant criminalized response to IPV that overlooks the needs of women who are racially, economically, and otherwise socially marginalized (Battle & Powell, 2024; Davis et al., 2022; Whalley & Hackett, 2017). The lack of intersectional consideration aligns with what Abraham and Tastsoglou (2016) referred to as the "cookie-cutter approach" (p. 576) to IPV under

criminalization where influencing factors to women's experiences, such as their diverse social

locations, needs, and relationships with dominant institutions, are overshadowed by the state's

prioritization of criminalization that limits the space for nuanced and contextualized support. In

other words, the normalized criminalization of IPV facilitates and reproduces an oversimplified

carceral response to this issue that overlooks the intersecting effects of structural inequities.

In short, while participants expressed different views on IPV and the role of police

intervention, their general assumptions of the police's role in protection and justice, the emphasis

on individual responsibility, and the largely absent consideration of women's social locations in

their interactions with the police are reflective of the carceral norms that prioritize punitive and

depoliticized responses to violence. The prominence of this individualistic and depoliticized

perspective on IPV highlights the insidious influence and impact of carceral norms that condition

us to accept, even demand, punishment as a legitimate and just response to violence and harm,

contributing to the conflation of vengeance and justice that diminishes the emphasis on

accountability and healing (Kaba, 2021). It is worth noting that participants' predominantly

depoliticized perspectives on IPV could also be attributed to the scope of this research, which

focused more on their experiences and perspectives of police intervention and did not allow

participants to fully expand on their understandings. Nevertheless, participants' responses are

important in highlighting the insidious influence of carceral logic in shaping the prevailing

depoliticized and oversimplified understanding of IPV.

The Limits of Carceral Protection: Empowering the State over Survivors

Although participants are mostly positive about police intervention in IPV, they also

highlighted its adverse impact on women facing this issue. This conflicting reality prompts a

critical examination of the assumption that criminal legal intervention offers meaningful

protection and safety to women experiencing IPV. It makes me wonder: What are the unintended

consequences of criminal legal protection? Protection for whom? And how effective is the

protection? Through reflecting on these questions and on the participants own reflections of their

observations, I contend that the dominant carceral response to IPV through criminalization

expands the state's carceral power by reinforcing punitive responses that overlook the complex

effects of criminal legal intervention and fail to account for how women's diverse social

locations shape their experiences within the criminal legal system.

When discussing their experiences with police intervention in IPV, participants noted the

role of police in safety planning, protecting women from physical violence, laying charges, and

providing a sense of justice. While recognizing the importance of police protection, particularly

in cases involving physical violence, participants also frequently spoke about women's lack of

power in decision-making in criminal legal involvement, particularly due to the mandatory

charging policy. For instance, June and Natalie reflected on the overwhelming experiences of

criminal legal engagement for women who did not wish to go to court or press charges against

their partners. Similarly, Robin discussed a case where the woman was "horrified" about the

charges that were laid following her engagement with the police. These examples trouble the

mandatory charging policy and raise questions about how this policy affects women's support-

seeking experiences and how it limits their ability to make decisions about their situation. This is

consistent with existing literature that highlights women's lack of autonomy in the current

criminal legal response to IPV (Aujla, 2021; Couture-Carron et al., 2022; Osborn & Rajah, 2022;

Wachholz & Miedema, 2000). Moreover, it underlines the unintended consequences of women's

diminished agency and autonomy within the dominant carceral response. As Paterson (2010)

poignantly argued, the Canadian mandatory or pro-charging policy to address IPV positions

criminal legal punishment and separation as the ultimate solutions to this issue. This leads to the narrow conceptualization of women's agency that primarily revolves around engagement with the criminal legal system and separation. In this context, state protection comes at the cost of women's autonomy and power, which is reminiscent of the power dynamic and rhetoric that are often present in IPV situations where women's voices and agency are diminished (Osborn & Rajah, 2022; Wachholz & Miedema, 2000). As a result, women may feel that their needs and choices are being silenced by the very system that is intended to support them.

Furthermore, the normalization of the carceral response to IPV overlooks the conditions that determine who is protected by the criminal legal system. For instance, Stephanie discussed the role of women's intersecting social locations in shaping their interactions and experiences with police intervention, highlighting that protection is not equally extended to women who experience IPV. Stephanie's perspective aligns with the anti-carceral feminist critique of carceral responses to violence against women that overlook the interlocking effects of social locations and prioritize the interests of the dominant social, racial, and economic groups (Armatta, 2018; Battle & Powell, 2024; Davis et al., 2022; Whalley & Hackett, 2017). The normative carceral response to IPV drowns out the nuance in women's experiences of violence and within the criminal legal system, making protection more accessible to those who are already situated within privileged positions of social hierarchies. This is further exemplified through Stephanie's reflection that marginalized women, such as racialized women, newcomers, women with disabilities, sex workers, and women who use substances, often face barriers to having their experiences legitimized within the criminal legal system and can even be criminalized themselves. By normalizing the one-size-fits-all carceral response to IPV, the state not only exacerbates harm toward marginalized women but also positions itself as a benevolent protector,

thus evading the responsibility to redress the very conditions of violence that it has helped create and maintain (Durazo, 2017; Goodmark, 2018). This then leads me to my next question: How effective is criminal legal protection?

An important aim of the criminalization of IPV is to deter violence and reduce recidivism among individuals who have perpetrated harm (Ad Hoc Federal-Provincial-Territorial Working Group, 2003). However, currently, there is no conclusive evidence suggesting that criminalization has a deterrent effect on IPV (Bumiller, 2010; Goodmark, 2018; Ryan et al., 2022; Xie & Lynch, 2017). This is further illustrated by a meta-analysis on the deterrent effects of criminalization for IPV by Garner and colleagues (2021), which found that while prosecution has a marginal deterrent effect, conviction showed no deterrent effect, and incarceration is connected to a significant escalation effect on violence. The unreliable effect of criminal legal intervention is also highlighted by participants. For example, June, Robin, and Stephanie expressed their concern about the limited effect of criminal legal intervention by pointing out that protective court orders, such as restraining orders, are symbolic gestures that have little tangible effect in ensuring women's safety. The protection order is sometimes what Robin calls "just a piece of paper" that offers little real protection when the person who perpetrated violence is already entangled with the criminal legal system and has no issue in breaching the order. This concern resonates with findings in Messing and colleagues' (2021) study examining women's decisions not to seek protection orders from the court when experiencing IPV, where participants reported the limited effectiveness of the orders in ending the violence, their partners' likelihood of noncompliance, and the orders' potential in escalating the violence. These limitations highlight how criminal legal protection falls short in ensuring women's safety and problematize its dominance in responding to IPV.

As I have already discussed, the criminal legal protection constrains women's agencies, overlooks the experiences and needs of marginalized women, and falls short of providing effective safety. These discussions illuminate the limitations in the criminal legal system's promise of protection and the prioritization of accountability to the state through criminal legal punishment, rather than women who have experienced violence (Bumiller, 2008; Goodmark, 2018), which reinforces the state's carceral power. While there are indeed women who wish to seek criminal legal intervention for their experiences of IPV, participants' concerns around the effectiveness of protection orders highlight that violence or harm does not end with criminal legal punishment. Even when women are able to find physical safety through criminal legal intervention, issues such as harassment, threats, emotional abuse, economic abuse, and using children to (re)gain control are common forms of IPV post-separation (Li, 2024; Thomas et al., 2015; Toews & Bermea, 2017). Despite the criminal legal intervention's oversight on the long-term effect of IPV, it remains the normative response to this issue, which allows the state to reify its carceral power through mobilizing the discourse of protection while leaving the structural oppressions contributing to IPV intact (Bernstein, 2007; Bumiller, 2008; Durazo, 2017; Davis et al., 2022; Kaba, 2021).

Moreover, for women whose wishes do not align with the state's objective of exclusion and confinement of people who have perpetrated harm (Bumiller, 2010; Davis et al., 2022; Kaba, 2021), their needs are often made secondary, exposing them to increased vulnerability to harm (Bumiller, 2008; Goodmark, 2018; Ryan et al., 2022). This, again, exemplifies the limitations of protection under the carceral framework and illuminates how the punitive response to IPV is structured to preserve the state's carceral power of control and surveillance rather than meeting survivors' complex needs. It is important to note that my discussions do not intend to dismiss the

criminal legal system's protective function entirely. Rather, I hope to draw attention to critical gaps in the carceral response to IPV and invite reflections on alternatives that are attentive to the complex dynamics of the issue and survivors' diverse needs. In the next section, I consider how the findings illuminate social work's uneasy position within the carceral system.

Social Work's Entanglement with Carceral Logics

As discussed earlier, carceral norms deeply shape how we respond to and understand IPV. This influence is also evident in participants' discussions of their perspectives on IPV and the kinds of responses they see as needed to address this issue. In this section, I examine how the carceral norms that emerged from participants' discussions illuminate social work's entanglement with the carceral system. In particular, I explore how the intersection of carceral and neoliberal discourses contributes to an increasingly depoliticized perspective on IPV in social work, diminishing the profession's commitment to social justice and transformation.

As noted in the previous section, although participants identified limitations in criminal legal interventions for ensuring women's safety and well-being, the use of criminal punishment in response to IPV was largely unchallenged. This uncritical acceptance of the criminalization of IPV reflects a tension within social work, in which the profession can unwittingly reinforce punitive carceral responses that exclude and dehumanize people who have caused harm and render them disposable (Bumiller, 2008; Kaba, 2021), thus undermining its commitment to social justice. In contrast to the medicalized and therapeutic interventions provided to survivors of IPV, people who perpetrated violence "are turned into a class of dehumanized offenders whose pathologies are beyond treatment" (Bumiller, 2008, p. 13) under the carceral response. The punitive underpinning of carceral response that abandons people who have caused harm rather than supporting their accountability, healing, and transformation is at odds with social work's

commitments to social justice and the well-being of all people (Canadian Association of Social

Workers, 2024). Moreover, excluding people from society through the criminal legal system

might interrupt the violence, but not necessarily end it. As Kaba (2021) poignantly highlighted:

"a system that never addresses the *why* behind a harm never actually contains the harm itself.

Cages confine people, not the conditions that facilitated their harms or the mentalities that

perpetuate violence" (p. 24, emphasis in original). In other words, IPV is the result of complex

social and structural conditions that cannot be meaningfully addressed by focusing on individual

responsibility alone. Participants' largely unexamined acceptance of criminalization of

individuals who have caused harm thus risks reinforcing the carceral influence in social work

that normalizes punishment for individuals and obscures structural responsibilities.

Furthermore, the normalization of individual-level interventions to IPV among

participants reflects the increasing carceral influence on social work responses to this issue. The

connection between VAW shelter work and the carceral system is not as apparent when

compared to other fields of practice, such as 'therapeutic' services delivered within the prison

system (Leotti, 2021), or court-mandated interventions like the Partner Abuse Response program

(Brockbank, 2023), which are closely tied to the criminal legal system. Although not an integral

part of the criminal legal system, VAW shelter work is increasingly shaped by the insidious

carceral logic that normalizes control, surveillance, and punishment as the only conceivable and

rational response to violence or harm (Battle & Powell, 2024; Bumiller, 2008; Davis et al., 2022;

Richie & Martensen, 2020). This is reflected in how most of the participants conceptualize IPV

through a depoliticized lens that emphasizes individual-level interventions, such as education on

signs of abuse, information about available supports, or the expansion of social services for

people who experience IPV. Moreover, as participants discussed in their experiences, VAW

shelter workers regularly engage with the police through various inter-agency collaborations, such as service referrals and coordinating support for women experiencing IPV. While these collaborations are important in addressing women's immediate safety needs, they remain embedded in the carceral framework that normalizes the reliance on policing to address IPV and leaves the underlying structural causes of violence unaddressed (Bernstein, 2007; Battle & Powell, 2024; Davis et al., 2022; Terwiel, 2020). Admittedly, individual-level and collaborative responses are important approaches to address survivors' immediate needs; however, they also reflect the broader neoliberal context that prioritizes individual responsibility (Garrett, 2019; Liebenberg et al., 2015). Next, I examine how neoliberalism works in tandem with carcerality to normalize punitive and individualistic responses to IPV in social work.

As discussed in theoretical frameworks, anti-carceral feminism is not only attentive to how unjust social structures are interconnected to strengthening social control but also how the neoliberal social order helps expand the carceral apparatus of the state (Bumiller, 2008; Davis et al., 2022; Kim, 2018; Terwiel, 2020). Neoliberalism as a mechanism of government exercises its power through social insecurity, punitive control, the discourse on individual responsibility, and the privatization of social services (Garrett, 2019; Wacquant, 2010). The effects of the criminalization of IPV in depoliticizing the issue align with the neoliberal rationale of responsibilizing the individual (Liebenberg et al., 2015). Both frameworks obscure structural inequities by diverting attention from structural conditions that contribute to interpersonal violence and reinforcing the narratives on individual responsibility. Importantly, the neoliberal responsibilization of the individual closely shapes women's help-seeking experiences in IPV situations (Brockbank & Greene, 2022), as it overlooks structural barriers that constrain women's access to safety. This is evident in police's victim-blaming attitude as discussed by participants,

including questioning women's role in provoking the violence or their decision to remain in the relationship. Responsibilization is also reflected in how Natalie frames women's agency through a binary lens, where help-seeking through the criminal legal system is synonymous with strength and choosing not to do so is framed as an individual shortcoming—or a lack of 'bandwidth'—rather than a response shaped by structural constraints. The responsibilization of the individual highlights the influence of neoliberalism that emphasizes individual responsibility, and how it works with carceral responses that obscure the intersection of structural and individual roots in contributing to IPV and shaping women's support-seeking (Abraham & Tastsoglou, 2016; Battle & Powell, 2024; Bernstein, 2007; Davis et al., 2022; Fraser, 2017).

Additionally, participants' dominant focus on expanding service options to better address IPV rather than demanding structural changes may be explained by the increasing depoliticization of anti-violence work in the neoliberal and carceral social context. While early anti-violence work was characterized by grass-roots women's organizing that focused on both micro-level service support and macro-level advocacy to change structural conditions to IPV (Abraham & Tastsoglou, 2016; Bumiller, 2008; Currie, 1990; Walker, 1990), these efforts are increasingly thwarted following the criminalization of IPV and the neoliberal privatization of social services that led to the incorporation of non-profit VAW organizations by the state to fill the service gaps (Bumiller, 2008; Durazo, 2017; Finley & Esposito, 2012; Wacquant, 2010). The partnership between non-profit VAW organizations and the state appears to be a win-win situation where these organizations' role in social service provision is legitimized by the state, while the state can relieve itself from the responsibility of assisting individuals experiencing violence. However, as non-profit VAW organizations rely heavily on funding from different levels of government, their practice is shaped by the state that limits their autonomy and

diminishes their radical role in transforming the system (Durazo, 2017; Evans et al., 2005; Mehrotra et al., 2016; Rodriguez, 2017). This arrangement reinforces both neoliberal and carceral depoliticization of anti-violence work that constrains VAW organizations in a narrow and individualistic path to address IPV, as organizations are expected to prioritize service delivery rather than attending to structural conditions of violence (Evans et al., 2005; Lehrner & Allen, 2009; Woolford & Curran, 2012).

As Lehrner and Allen (2009) highlighted in their research, the prevalence of depoliticized social service provision created by neoliberal funding constraints is shifting VAW organizations away from their activist agenda. This shift, along with the increasing entanglement of VAW shelter work with carceral systems, as evident in participants' discussion on inter-agency collaboration with the police and Natalie's reflection that police and shelter workers have to work together and often support the same population, poses challenges in upholding social work's professional values. In particular, the neoliberal and carceral influence on the normalization of depoliticized and individualistic responses to and understandings of IPV contradicts social work's commitment to social justice and collective well-being, as it obscures structural accountability and overlooks the unjust social conditions that sustain violence (Davis et al., 2022; Kim, 2013; Leotti, 2021; Mehrotra et al., 2016). While individual-level supports and interventions are important, an overemphasis on individualistic responses as a result of the intersecting influence of neoliberalism and carceral norms distracts VAW organizations from addressing intersectional systemic issues and creating meaningful changes that are rooted in collective care and transformation. In the next section, I discuss the tension within anti-carceral feminist and transformative justice-oriented responses to IPV as emerged from the findings.

While I have critiqued the dominant carceral response to IPV throughout the discussion, I also recognize that there are aspects of police intervention that are working in the current context, particularly in relation to physical safety. For example, Natalie and June discussed the role of police in supporting women who experience IPV through shelter referrals and safety planning that are important in addressing women's immediate safety needs. These examples reflect a complex reality that police intervention is often a necessary support for women who experience IPV, but the continued overreliance on this approach solidifies the dominance of carceral responses to addressing violence. Attending to this complexity is important to the anti-carceral feminist and transformative justice perspectives that emphasize the need to address the immediate needs while also building systems that facilitate long-term and non-punitive approaches to well-being (Armatta, 2018; Davis et al., 2022; Mingus, 2022; Terwiel, 2020). From the perspective of these frameworks, violence cannot be adequately addressed through criminal legal punishment, and carceral responses need to be abolished and replaced by approaches rooted in collective healing, care, and accountability (Davis et al., 2022; Kaba, 2021; Mingus, 2022; Richie & Martensen, 2020). However, questions arise when it comes to the feasibility of anti-carceral approaches to IPV, particularly when participants see police intervention as necessary in ensuring physical safety.

As Battle and Powell (2024) illustrated in their study on how professionals who engage with anti-violence work and survivors of violence understand abolition and transformative justice, some participants are apprehensive of an anti-carceral approach to IPV because it seems 'out-of-touch' with the reality that some people would feel safer with police presence. The connection between police presence and safety is also reflected in participants' discussions in my

study. For instance, June emphasized the need for police involvement in IPV where there is actual or a threat of physical violence. Similarly, while Stephanie highlighted the need for alternative options outside of the criminal legal system, she contended that police are necessary in high-risk situations. These discussions illustrate that while the carceral response to IPV is flawed, it is often a necessary intervention in addressing physical violence. Moreover, these perspectives reflect a common tension in conversations around anti-carceral and transformative justice responses to violence, where imagining a world without police or prisons often invokes fears about safety (Battle & Powell, 2024; Kaba, 2021; Whynacht, 2021). In this context, questions such as 'Without police and criminal legal interventions, who will protect women experiencing IPV?' are valid and need to be considered to carve out spaces for anti-carceral and transformative justice practices that address structural and interpersonal harms without relying on the carceral system.

Concerns around the feasibility of a police-free world are reflective of the reality that carceral responses are the dominant and often the only option for safety in the current context (Battle & Powell, 2024; Kramer & Remster, 2022). As participants noted, while not all women wanted to engage with the police or the broader criminal legal system, the lack of alternative responses often left them with no other choice for ending the violence. Notably, participants also highlighted issues with police intervention in IPV, including inadequate support, victim-blaming, and re-traumatization. This is also reflected in the literature review discussion on the risks and harm perpetuated by police involvement, particularly for marginalized survivors (Aujla, 2021; Duhaney, 2022; Garza et al., 2022; Kajeepeta et al., 2024; Kaye & Glecia, 2025). Despite the potential for harm, the lack of alternative options renders criminal legal intervention necessary and often unavoidable. Importantly, scholars highlight that people demand criminal legal

protection not because it is working or that they support carceral responses; rather, it is because police and the broader carceral system are often presented as the only viable and conceivable option (Battle & Powell, 2024; Kramer & Remster, 2022). From an anti-carceral feminist perspective, this reflects how the carceral logic is sustained through the narrow and naturalized punitive response to IPV, reinforcing the illusion that safety is achieved through the criminal legal system and obscuring the possibility of transformative and anti-carceral alternatives.

Additionally, the fear of the potentially dangerous other in the absence of the carceral system speaks to the successful obfuscation of structural violence under the carceral norm, which emphasizes individual responsibility and maintains unjust gender, racial, and class hierarchies (Davis et al., 2022; Kaba, 2021; Richie & Martensen, 2020; Whalley & Hackett, 2017). This fear is further amplified by the aforementioned neoliberal discourse that emphasizes individual responsibility over structural injustices. When harm is framed primarily as the result of individual wrongdoers, rather than systemic inequities, it limits our ability to imagine and pursue alternative and nonpunitive responses that center on accountability and transformation rather than exclusion and punishment (Kaba, 2021). Importantly, anti-carceral feminist responses to IPV are not just about abolishing the police and prison systems but also about dismantling structures of cisheteropatriarchy, racism, colonialism, ableism, and capitalism that create the conditions for this issue (Davis et al., 2022; Kaba, 2021). By addressing these systemic injustices, we can work toward collective well-being and safety in ways that move beyond the reliance on the carceral system. Questions may arise regarding what to do before we have achieved the structural conditions that foster collective well-being and safety. To answer this, I want to highlight that anti-carceral feminist and transformative justice responses to violence emphasize interventions at both the individual and structural levels.

Anti-carceral feminist and transformative justice practitioners, organizers, and activists emphasize building systems of support and our capacity for transformative care that fosters collective accountability, healing, and well-being, while also resisting and demanding changes for structural transformation (Armatta, 2018; Davis et al., 2022; Mingus, 2022). As mentioned in the theoretical frameworks, many grassroots organizations led by Black and other women of color abolitionist activists, along with queer, trans, two-spirited, and gender non-conforming people of color have begun the work of building community capacity on anti-carceral responses to violence, emphasizing prevention, intervention, and transformation rooted in collective healing and accountability (Kaba, 2021; Kim, 2018; Mingus, 2022). While not explicitly framed within an anti-carceral perspective, participants' suggestions for alternative interventions to IPV, including replacing police with IPV specialist officers, expanding supports outside of the emergency shelter system, and Indigenous restorative justice approach to violence, offer important entry points for building community and social service capacities toward anti-carceral and transformative responses to violence. Furthermore, by continuing conversations around alternative and nonpunitive responses to IPV in social work, we can create more space for transformative justice practice and anti-carceral advocacy that better support our collective well-being. Within the current unjust neoliberal and carceral context, the work toward an anti-carceral future is challenging, as our work and lives are deeply shaped by these systems. Yet, it is within this context that the need for collective anti-carceral efforts is all the more urgent.

Implications

This thesis intends to develop a better understanding of the impact of a dominant carceral response to IPV on both women who experience violence and frontline shelter workers who engage with the police in their practice. The findings and discussions have implications for how

we respond to violence on the policy level and within social work and help inform future research on anti-carceral IPV interventions. As illustrated in the findings, the dominant carceral approach to IPV prioritizes an oversimplified understanding of violence and women's experiences, perpetuating harm toward those who are marginalized by society and those who do not wish to engage with the criminal legal system. This invites reflections on current policy responses to IPV, particularly the mandatory or pro-charging policy in Canada. The complex impacts of police intervention in IPV on women's safety and well-being call for the lens of intersectionality in policymaking that facilitates attention to the plurality and multiplicity of people's experiences as a result of interlocking power structures (Williams, 2016). Informed by anti-carceral feminist and transformative justice lenses, policymakers can also explore nonpunitive responses to IPV that support people who have perpetrated violence to take accountability for their actions and transform their behaviors that promote healing for all involved. Furthermore, the findings show that social work practice in the VAW shelter setting is entangled with carceral logics that naturalize punishment and obscure structural injustices, illuminating important areas of reflection and change within the profession.

A growing number of scholars and activists have highlighted the impact of carceral logics on social work (Davis et al., 2022; Durazo, 2017; Jacobs et al., 2021; Leotti, 2021; Richie & Martensen, 2020), where services are characterized by their regulatory function that prioritizes control and surveillance while diminishing the profession's political visions toward social transformation. This thesis builds on these important works and illuminates how carceral norms are reified in the context of VAW shelter work. The findings highlight the need for social workers to begin examining the ways that our current anti-violence work through the shelter system, while offering immediate support, is complicit in maintaining the carceral and punitive function

of the state that puts the responsibility on the individual while sustaining unjust social hierarchies (Durazo, 2017; Jacobs et al., 2021; Leotti, 2021; Richie & Martensen, 2020). This contentious relationship between social work and the carceral system, as well as the complex impact of criminalization of IPV, demands critical reflection on how we, as a social justice-oriented profession, might resist complicity in structural violence and engage in practice and advocacy that foster collective care, well-being, and safety. Moreover, the thesis illuminates the potential of anti-carceral feminist and transformative justice perspectives in informing more critical and justice-oriented social work practice by illuminating the interconnections of systems of power and oppression that shape people's experiences and attending to both individual and structural dimensions of harm, accountability, and transformation.

Finally, the findings of this thesis may inform future research on frontline workers' perspectives on anti-carceral interventions to IPV. While this thesis is informed by the anti-carceral feminist lens, it did not explicitly examine how social workers in the VAW field understand or undertake anti-carceral practice. Future research could explore how social workers doing anti-violence work conceptualize and implement anti-carceral responses, and how they negotiate the tensions between systemic or organizational constraints and their anti-carceral values. Additionally, this study may offer insights to future research on VAW organizations that are actively engaging in anti-carceral feminist responses to IPV. As the findings illustrate, while police intervention creates complex impacts on women experiencing IPV, inter-agency relationships between VAW shelters and the police play a positive role in supporting these women. Exploring how organizations committed to anti-carceral feminist values navigate the tensions of working within systems that they also seek to resist can offer important insights into opportunities and possibilities of resistance and change to carceral responses to IPV.

<u>Limitations</u>

As an MSW thesis, there are several limitations that should be considered. First, due to the limited timeframe for completing the research, the small number of participants limits the extent to which the findings can be generalized to VAW frontline workers more broadly. Moreover, this study did not require participants to share their racial or ethnic background, which evades the examination of how workers' social locations shape their perspectives on police intervention in IPV. I made the decision to leave out an analysis of participants' racial or ethnic identities due to the scope and feasibility of a master's thesis project, as well as to avoid the risk of overgeneralization based on a small number of participants. Similarly, the perspectives of workers supporting queer and trans survivors, and how gender and sexuality shape interactions with the police were not explored in this study.

Additionally, follow-up interviews with participants regarding my interpretation of their discussions could be helpful in deepening and enriching my analysis. This was not carried out due to time constraints. Time limitations also impacted the data collection process, as interviews were conducted online and consisted of only one interaction with each participant. This format made it difficult to build a strong rapport, which may have affected the depth of responses and limited opportunities to ask follow-up or clarifying questions during the interviews. Future studies can adopt a community-engaged framework that facilitates relationship building and generates richer findings. As well, studies that focus more specifically on how police intervention in IPV impacts marginalized groups, such as people who are racialized, immigrant, queer, trans, or living with disabilities, can offer important insights into the complex impact of carceral responses to violence and how they shape access to support and safety for different communities.

Epilogue

This thesis has explored frontline VAW shelter workers' experiences working with the police and examined the impact of the carceral response to IPV. Grounded in anti-carceral feminism and transformative justice frameworks, my findings point to the complexities of the criminalized response to IPV that problematizes the dominant one-size-fits-all carceral response and highlights the need for alternative responses that prioritize healing and transformation over punishment. They not only helped inform a better understanding of the impact of police intervention on women experiencing IPV but also facilitated reflection on how our profession might practice differently in response to this issue.

Through the research process, I continue to reflect on the complex reality of the criminalization of IPV, including what it means for women experiencing violence and for social work. While participants spoke about the positive impact of police intervention, particularly in relation to its role in validating women's experiences and offering timely support in cases of physical violence, they also voiced concerns around issues with police response and the mandatory or pro-charging policy. These discussions helped to paint a more nuanced picture of the impact of criminalization on women and highlighted the need to rethink how we address IPV in ways that attend to its complexity and women's differential experiences with the criminal legal system. In reflecting on the implications of criminalization on social work, I recognize that the profession is entangled in unjust structures such as neoliberalism and the carceral system that closely shape how we understand and respond to IPV. This raises important questions about how we can carve out a space for anti-carceral and transformative practices within systems that often prioritize individual responsibility over collective healing and justice.

While this MSW thesis is limited in its scope and generalizability, it has challenged me to reflect on my own assumptions about punishment and justice, and to examine the role of social work within the carceral system. The critical anti-carceral feminist and transformative justice lenses that problematize carceral and punitive responses to IPV will guide my future practice by encouraging me to question dominant assumptions about justice and accountability. As well, I hope this work invites others to consider how social work can practice from an anti-carceral perspective within and beyond the anti-violence field.

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Appendices

<u>Appendix A</u>

Email Script sent by the Researcher to request assistance with Recruitment

Email subject line: Participants Needed for a Research on the Impact of Criminalization of Intimate Partner Violence

Dear {contact at organization},

I am Mona, Xin Huang I'm currently conducting research about the impact of criminalization of intimate partner violence. The research is part of my master's studies at McMaster University's School of Social Work in Hamilton, Ontario under the supervision of Dr. Saara Greene of McMaster's School of Social Work.

I am hoping that you will be willing to assist me with recruitment. If you are willing, I will ask you to send out an email on my behalf. I have attached the email script and recruitment materials to this email. If you feel these materials need some modifications to make them work best for your staff, please let me know and we can determine a way to modify the material in a way that is acceptable to the McMaster Research Ethics Board.

If you have any questions, please contact:

Student PI name: Xin (Mona) Huang   Faculty PI name: Dr. Saara Greene
Contact Information: huanx32@mcmaster.ca   Contact Information: greenes@mcmaster.ca

This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance from the McMaster Research Ethics Board (Project #7553).

<u>Appendix B</u>

**Recruitment Email Script sent on Behalf of the Researcher
by the Holder of the Participants' Contact Information**

Email subject line: Participants Needed for a Research on the Impact of Criminalization of
Intimate Partner Violence

Dear all,

Mona, Xin Huang, a McMaster student, has contacted [name of organization] with the hope of
recruiting participants for her research on the effects of police intervention in intimate partner
violence. The research is part of her master's studies at McMaster University's School of Social
Work in Hamilton, Ontario under the supervision of Dr. Saara Greene of McMaster's School of
Social Work.

If you are interested in getting more information about taking part in Mona's study, please read
the brief description below and or **CONTACT** Mona **DIRECTLY** by email at
huanx32@mcmaster.ca. Mona will not tell anyone at [name of organization] who participated.
Taking part or not taking part in this study will not affect your status or any services you receive
through [name of organization].

The following is a brief description of the study.

Mona, Xin Huang is inviting you to participate in an interview that will take approximately 60 to
90 minutes for which you will receive a $15 e-gift card of your choice. The study will take place
via the online videoconferencing platform, Zoom.

To be eligible to participate in this study you need to:
1. have at least one year of frontline experience in a violence against women shelter in the
   Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area (GTHA).
2. have experience working with the police when supporting women who experience
   intimate partner violence.
3. currently working or have worked in a violence against women shelter in the GTHA in the
   past five years.

For the full details of the study, please click on <u>this link</u> to the Letter of Information.

Mona would like to thank you in advance for your time and consideration.

If you are interested in participating or if you have any questions, please contact:

Student PI name: Xin (Mona) Huang   Faculty PI name: Dr. Saara Greene
Contact Information: huanx32@mcmaster.ca   Contact Information: greenes@mcmaster.ca

**This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance from the McMaster Research
Ethics Board (Project #7553).**

Recruitment Poster

McMaster University

The Impact of Criminalization of Intimate Partner Violence: Insights from Frontline Violence Against Women Shelter Workers

Research Participants Needed

Looking for frontline violence against women (VAW) shelter workers in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area (GTHA) in a study examining the effects of police intervention in intimate partner violence (IPV).

This research is interested in finding out frontline shelter workers' experiences working with the police in the VAW shelter system and their perception of its impact. Your participation involves one (1) interview that will take place on Zoom. The interview will take approximately 60 to 90 minutes of your time. In appreciation for your time, you will receive a **$15 e-gift card** of your choice.

To qualify for this study, you need to:
1. have at least one year of frontline experience in a VAW shelter in the GTHA.
2. have experience working with the police when supporting women who experience IPV.
3. currently working or have worked in a VAW shelter in the past five years.

Potential risks/discomforts involved in this study:
1. There are sometimes potential risks of personal and emotional discomfort or distress when discussing your experiences of working with the police when supporting women who experience IPV.
2. The interview will be audio-recorded.

You do not need to answer questions that you do not want to answer or that make you feel uncomfortable, and I will anonymize your identity in the research. Audio recordings of the sessions will be destroyed immediately after they have been transcribed by me. Only I will have access to the data and the transcribed Zoom recordings. Participation is voluntary, and there will be no consequences for not participating or for withdrawing from the study after providing consent.

If you are interested in participating or have questions, please email Xin (Mona) Huang: **huanx32@mcmaster.ca**.

This study has been reviewed by and received ethics clearance from the McMaster Research Ethics Board (Project #7553).

<u>Appendix D</u>

Screening Questions

Thank you for your interest in the study: The Impact of Criminalization of Intimate Partner Violence: Insights from Frontline Violence Against Women Shelter Workers, led by Mona, Xin Huang.

My study has some eligibility criteria – some qualities that all participants need to have in order to take part. I am hoping you will answer the questions below, before going through the consent process, to determine if you are eligible to take part.

Do you:
1. have at least one year of frontline experience in a violence against women shelter in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area (GTHA).
2. have experience working with the police when supporting women who experience intimate partner violence.

Are you:
3. currently working or have worked in a violence against women shelter in the GTHA in the past five years.

If you answer YES to all three questions, you are eligible for the study. Please let me know by replying to this email and I will email you the Letter of Information and follow up to schedule an interview.
If you answer NO to any of the questions, unfortunately, you're not suitable for this study. Thank you for your time and consideration of my study.

The screening information will be saved in encrypted files on a password-protected computer that can only be accessed by the student principal investigator. Information of individuals who are not eligible will be immediately deleted to ensure their privacy and confidentiality.

LETTER OF INFORMATION / CONSENT

The Impact of Criminalization of Intimate Partner Violence: Insights from Frontline Violence Against Women Shelter Workers

Student Investigator:	**Faculty Supervisor:**
Xin (Mona) Huang	Dr. Saara Greene
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McMaster University	McMaster University
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What am I trying to discover?
You are invited to take part in this study on examining the effects of police intervention in intimate partner violence (IPV) through the perspectives of frontline violence against women (VAW) shelter workers in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area. This research is interested in finding out frontline shelter workers' experiences working with the police in the VAW shelter system and their perception of its impact. Through this exploratory research, I hope to better understand the implications of a punitive response to IPV on both women who experience violence and frontline shelter workers who engage with the police in their practice.

I am a Master of Social Work student, and I am doing this research for a thesis project under the supervision of Dr. Saara Greene**.**

What will happen during the study?
If you are interested in this study, I will be asking you a few screening questions to determine your suitability for the study before you start participating in the study. Once you enter the study, you will participate in one (1) interview. The interview will be around 60 to 90 minutes, and it will be conducted remotely via the video-conferencing platform, Zoom. The interview will be one-on-one with me, and I will ask you questions such as "What factors led you to work with the police when supporting women who experience IPV?" and "What is your experience working with the police when supporting women who experience IPV?" I will also ask you for some background information like your years of experience in the field. I will take handwritten notes and audio record the interview with your permission.

Are there any risks to doing this study?
There are sometimes potential risks of personal and emotional discomfort or distress when discussing your experiences of working with the police when supporting women who experience IPV. You do not need to answer questions that you do not want to answer or that make you feel uncomfortable, and I will anonymize your identity in the research. As this study uses an online videoconferencing platform, Zoom, to collect data, potential social risks could occur as a result of data breaches such as "Zoom bombings." To minimize this risk, meeting passwords and waiting rooms will be used to ensure the privacy of the meeting and prevent uninvited guests. Additionally, your video will be set to 'off' initially and it may be turned 'on' if you choose to do so; your audio will be muted upon entry, and you are advised to change your display name to a pseudonym prior to the meeting. I describe below the steps I am taking to protect your privacy

Are there any benefits to doing this study?
Although you may not directly benefit from this research, this study has the potential to provide a space where frontline VAW shelter workers can share their experiences and perspectives of working with the police. I hope that what is learned as a result of this study will help us to better understand police intervention in IPV and to improve practice and policy responses to this issue.

Payment or Reimbursement

Participants will receive a $15 e-gift card of their choice within 24 hours following the completion of their participation.

Confidentiality
You are participating in this study confidentially. I will not use your name or any information that would allow you to be identified. No one but me will know whether you were in the study unless you choose to tell them.

Every effort will be made to protect your confidentiality and privacy. I will not use your name or any information that would allow you to be identified. However, we are often identifiable through the stories we tell, and through the combination of demographic variables (e.g., the city you have worked in or the length of your employment) it may be possible to identify some participants. Please keep this in mind when deciding whether you want to participate and what to tell me in the interview.

This study will use the Zoom platform to collect data, which is an externally hosted cloud-based service. A link to their privacy policy is available here (LINK). Please note that whilst this service is approved for collecting data in this study by the McMaster Research Ethics Board, there is a small risk with any platform such as this of data that is collected on external servers falling outside the control of the research team. If you are concerned about this, I would be happy to make alternative arrangements for you to participate, perhaps via telephone. Please talk to me if you have any concerns.

The consent information and data you provide (such as interview transcripts) will be kept as encrypted files and saved on a password-protected computer that only I will have access to. The consent information and data will be stored for three (3) years after the completion of the research in case of participant complaints or allegations of research misconduct. At the end of the retention period, all copies of documents containing participants' personal information will be deleted or shredded using a secure shredding service to ensure that they will not be restored or recovered.

A selection of anonymized data will be posted publicly, for example, stories or sentences narrated by you might be included in my thesis, the research poster, and/or a journal article by me as it may be necessary to contextualize and validate findings/arguments made in the report. Publicly published data will not be destroyed at the end of the retention period unless there are legal reasons to do so. Live caption on Zoom will be used to transcribe the interview. The interview will also be recorded on the application Voice Memos on Apple to verify the accuracy of the transcript. All audio recordings will be destroyed once the transcripts have been verified and finalized. Transcripts will be saved as encrypted files on a password-protected computer.

Participation and Withdrawal:
Your participation in this study is voluntary. It is your choice to be part of the study or not. There will be no consequences for not participating or for withdrawing from the study after providing consent. If you decide to be part of the study, you can withdraw from the individual interview for whatever reason, even after giving consent or part-way through the study or up until **June 17, 2025,** when I expect to be submitting the first draft of my thesis. If you decide to withdraw, there will be no consequences for you. You will be informed of your right to withdraw from the project at any stage of the project in the information letter and consent process and reminded at the beginning of the individual interview.

If you do not want to answer some of the questions you do not have to, but you can still be in the study. If you want to withdraw during data collection (the interview), simply tell me your wishes. If you wish to withdraw after the data collection is complete, please email me. In case of withdrawal, any data you have provided will be destroyed unless you indicate otherwise.

Information about the Study Results:
I expect to have this study completed by approximately **June 30, 2025**. If you would like a brief summary of the results, please let me know how you would like it sent to you.

Questions about the Study: If you have questions or need more information about the study itself, please contact me at:

Xin (Mona) Huang
School of Social Work
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Hamilton, Ontario, Canada
(365)-999-8686
E-mail: huanx32@mcmaster.ca

This study has been reviewed by the McMaster Research Ethics Board and received ethics clearance under project **[#7553]**. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a participant or about the way the study is conducted, please contact:

McMaster Research Ethics Office
Telephone: (905) 525-9140 ext. 23142
E-mail: <u>mreb@mcmaster.ca</u>

CONSENT

- I have read the information presented in the information letter about a study being conducted by Xin (Mona) Huang of McMaster University.
- I have had the opportunity to ask questions about my involvement in this study and to receive additional details I requested.
- I understand that if I agree to participate in this study, I may withdraw from the study at any time or up until **June 17, 2025.**
- I agree to participate in the study.

Consent Questions:

1. Would you like a copy of the study results via email? If so, which email address should I send it to?

   _____

2. Which e-gift card would you like to receive? Which email address should I send the e-gift card to?

   _____

3. Do you agree to audio recording?   Yes   /   No

4. Do you agree to allow your anonymized study data to be posted publicly? Yes   /   No

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Appendix F

Oral Consent Log
(for documenting oral consent obtained by telephone, online or in person)

Participant's Unique Study ID number or Pseudonym	Date of Consent:	Agree to audio recording	Agree to have anonymized study data posted publicly	Send copy of study results via email	Email address to receive the study results	Choice of the e-gift card	Email address to receive the e-gift card