Lesbian Invisibility in Quebec’s Domestic Violence Policy

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ABSTRACT

Lesbians are listed as one of the vulnerable populations in Quebec’s Action Plan on Domestic Violence; however, simply naming lesbians in the action plan does not contribute to understanding the different ways they may experience domestic violence. The application of an universal heterosexual framework of domestic violence that is adapted for vulnerable populations not only renders invisible any experiences that do not fit within the existing framework, but also fails to consider that ‘vulnerable populations’ are not homogeneous groups. The intersectional analysis I apply to Quebec’s Action Plan on Domestic Violence (2012-2017) exemplifies the ways that the Action Plan prioritizes cisgender heterosexual women as the primary axis of oppression, therefore, resulting in a conception of domestic violence that is not inclusive of all experiences of domestic violence. For example, not only does my analysis illuminate the invisibility of lesbians collectively in the Action Plan, but also the invisibility of different experiences of domestic violence among lesbians. Incorporating intersectionality into domestic violence policy, and public policy in general, will highlight these exclusions and help find policy solutions to address the needs of all individuals. Therefore, this paper will contribute to addressing the limited use of intersectionality in policy, and emphasize the need for intersectional policy analysis to be further explored and developed.

Introduction

Public policy does not represent the different experiences of all populations. For example, domestic violence policy is often based on a heterosexual framework that assumes a man/woman relationship where the man is typically depicted as the perpetrator, and the woman the victim (Russo 2001, 60). However, this does not reflect reality since heterosexual relationships are only one type of relationship, and by constructing domestic violence in this way it becomes invisible in same-sex relationships (Dempsey 2011, 390). Considering Canada’s increasing diversity, it is important that public policy move beyond this type of universal policy to represent all Canadians and their experiences. An intersectional policy analysis is one tool that will help identify how difference is excluded. Therefore, in this paper, I will apply Hankivsky et al.’s (2012b) intersectional-based policy analysis (IBPA) framework to Quebec’s Action Plan on Domestic Violence (2012-2017)¹ to expose how the Action Plan renders lesbian² experiences invisible. This analysis will highlight that simply listing lesbians as a vulnerable population is insufficient for visibility because their experiences need to be acknowledged and understood.

¹ May be referred to as the policy or domestic violence policy. When I refer to the original 1995 policy, I will indicate this.
² Lesbian will include all self-identified women who are physically and/or emotionally attracted to other women.
Why Lesbians?

The LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning/queer) community encompasses a multitude of identities. I do not think that analysing everyone who fits under this will adequately incorporate the diverse experiences and complexities that exist. Using lesbian as an umbrella term itself is a risk of universalizing the experiences of domestic violence; however, I chose this population for my analysis because of my own commitment to improving the lives of all lesbians (as an umbrella term) in Quebec. It should be noted that even though I use the term “lesbian” inclusively, the majority of existing literature on lesbian domestic violence is based on the experience of white lesbians (not as an umbrella term) and bisexual women. Therefore, the literature should not be interpreted as inclusive of all lesbians.

Why Quebec’s Domestic Violence Policy

Most literature on lesbian domestic violence fails to address domestic violence policy. The literature focuses on identifying possible reasons why domestic violence happens (West 2002, 124) and the different types of abuse (Irwin 2008, 207), as well as responses by professionals (Banks and Fedewa 2012, 199; Donovan and Hester 2014, 172; Poorman 2001, 13), by the lesbian community (West 2002, 122), and by family and friends (Giorgio 2002, 1241; Irwin 2008, 210). There is literature on barriers to reporting (Brown 2008, 460; Donovan and Hester 2014, 157), and the effects of gender stereotypes on lesbian domestic violence (Brown 2008, 459; Hassouneh and Glass 2008, 316; Little and Terrence 2010, 430-431), but there is a limited amount of literature that examines domestic violence policies to determine the level of lesbian invisibility in the policy, reasons for this invisibility, or how invisibility in the policy likely impacts those who experience domestic violence. This is the gap I intend to address.

I chose Quebec’s Action Plan on Domestic Violence because of Quebec’s history of including the LGBTQ community in its policies, dating as far back as 1977. It was the first Canadian province to include sexual orientation as a prohibited ground of discrimination in its human rights legislation in 1977 (Hurley 2005, 4); it created civil unions, a type of relationship similar to marriage and inclusive of same-sex couples in 2002 (6); it legalized same-sex marriage in 2004 (10); and in 2008 the Quebec Government assigned the Minister of Justice the responsibility to fight homophobia in Quebec (Quebec 2013). This led to the creation of Quebec’s Policy against Homophobia and subsequently, the Action Plan. Given that the Quebec government has made considerable efforts to include the LGBTQ community both legally and socially, analyzing Quebec’s Action Plan on Domestic Violence is an opportunity to determine if relationship problems such as domestic violence, are given the same attention in same-sex couples as it is in heterosexual couples, or whether policy inclusion is merely a symbolic act.

Quebec’s Domestic Violence Policy

Quebec’s current Action Plan on Domestic Violence (2012-2017) is an extension of the original
1995 domestic violence policy. The original policy was created to coordinate all sectors involved in domestic violence so that they could work together (Quebec 1995, 11). In addition to nine guiding principles (30), there were also four focal points for intervention: prevention and promotion, detect situations of violence, implement special measures for First Nations and Inuit, and adapt for special clientele, and finally, intervene (32). These focal points and guiding principles remain central in the current Action Plan (2012-2017), which now further includes one hundred measures to combat domestic violence in the general population, and thirty-five measures directed towards the Aboriginal community3 (Quebec 2012, Message from the Ministers). Additionally, the policy offered services to individuals in isolated areas, and adapted their services to meet the needs of certain populations, such as the elderly, Aboriginal people, gays and lesbians, cultural communities, people with a disability, and abused men (Quebec 1995, 15). Since these groups are among those listed in the current Action Plan, and lesbians may intersect in one or more of these groups, intersectionality will be useful in identifying their different experiences of domestic violence.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality and Policy

Intersectionality recognizes that individuals are more than single categories (race, gender, sexuality, age, ability) and locations, but are mutually constituted by social processes and institutions that are shaped and influenced by power (Hankivsky et al. 2012b, 17-18). If these intersections are not acknowledged in domestic violence policy, domestic violence will continue to be perceived as a heterosexual problem. This perception is evident in Quebec’s domestic violence policy where cisgender women are implicitly the primary axis of oppression, therefore, constructing domestic violence as violence inflicted by men on women, and rendering anything outside of this either invisible or marginal. Intersectionality can change this perception in policy because it has the potential to ensure visibility of all types of domestic violence by challenging the gender inequality perception of domestic violence (Bograd 1999, 277), questioning power hierarchies (Lombardo and Agustin 2016, 365), acknowledging that individuals are shaped by various intersections (Hankivsky et al. 2012a, 18) and by identifying who benefits and who is excluded from policy (8).

Despite the potential of intersectionality to address other domestic violence realities in policy, there is little existing literature on domestic violence policy and intersectionality that addresses lesbian experiences. Most of the literature depicts domestic violence as a heterosexual problem, primarily looking at the intersections of gender, class, and race, while either ‘naming’ sexual orientation with little or no further discussion, or simply not mentioning sexual orientation (Lombardo and Agustin 2016; Nixon and Humphreys 2010; Strid et al. 2013). Dempsey (2011) is one of the exceptions; he illustrates that same-sex domestic violence is made invisible by gender-based approaches to domestic violence.

3 Due to space restrictions, I did not include my analysis of Aboriginal people, however, I did analyse this section and there was no mention of sexual orientation.
(390), and that there are consequences of this invisibility, such as lack of access to services (389). This demonstrates that intersectionality is needed to move beyond a heterosexual framework in domestic violence policy to illustrate the diverse ways lesbians experience it.

The Intersectional-Based Policy Analysis (IBPA) Framework

The intersectional-based policy analysis (IBPA) framework was developed to address health inequities at the policy level. However, according to Hankivsky et al. (2012b), the framework can be applied to any policy. There are two components to the framework: a set of guiding principles, and twelve questions to help guide the analysis (Hankivsky et al. 2012b, 34). The questions consist of two categories: descriptive and transformative. Descriptive questions are meant to gain background information regarding the policy problem and who it impacts, while transformative questions are directed towards finding equitable solutions to the problem (34). The guiding principles of the framework include intersecting categories, multi-level analysis, power, reflexivity, time and space, diverse knowledges, social justice, and equity. Following these guiding principles will ensure the analysis is intersectional, and therefore, in the best position to reduce inequities in the policy.

The remainder of my paper will be divided into six different sections, with each section guided by questions from the IBPA in order to interrogate the ways that lesbian domestic violence is invisible in the policy.

Analysis

What is the Policy ‘Problem’ Under Consideration?

What Assumptions Underlie this Representation of the ‘Problem’?

The “problem” addressed in the policy is domestic violence, and is understood as violence inflicted by men on women. This is implied when the policy states that “gender equality is the primary condition for the elimination of domestic violence” (Quebec 2012, 2). Donovan and Hester (2014) contend that the ‘main’ understanding of domestic violence has a victim/perpetrator dichotomy that is influenced by gender norms (161). This determines not only the identity of the victims (women), and the perpetrators (men), but how each will look. For example, women are expected to be dependent, nurturing, and passive, whereas men are expected to be assertive, autonomous, and less caring; therefore, these expectations create the victim/perpetrator dichotomy (Little and Terrence 2010, 431). These assumptions are what they call the “public story” of domestic violence (Donovan and Hester 2014, 161).

How Have Representations of the ‘Problem’ Come About?

The “public story” of domestic violence emerged because of feminist activists (Donovan and Hester 2010, 281) who raised awareness about women’s abuse. Through their efforts, domestic violence
changed from something that was considered a “private matter” to a “criminal matter” and legislation over the years both federally and provincially has changed to reflect this (Department of Justice 2002, 2). Naming the violence has changed historically, and has included the following: wife abuse, wife assault, violence against women in relationships, spousal abuse, and partner abuse (Department of Justice 2002, 1). Regardless of how domestic violence was named, the implication remained that women were the victims, and this remains true today despite efforts to de-gender abuse, as evidenced by the term “intimate partner violence.”

How are Groups Differentially Affected by the Representation of the ‘Problem’?

The current representation of domestic violence makes it more difficult to “recognize” the problem in lesbian relationships. The primary reason is that the ‘public story’ is based on heteronormative assumptions. Heteronormativity normalizes heterosexuality through institutionalization (Jackson 2009, 150) where the male/female dichotomy plays a central role (Donovan and Hester 2014, 59; Jackson 2009, 149), such as marriage and family policy. Policies that are based on the heterosexual family are more likely to be heteronormative (Smith 2007, 100), thus perpetuating heterosexual ideals, and resulting in the presumption that everyone is heterosexual (Donovan and Hester 2014, 59). This presumption of heterosexuality is further maintained through every day actions such as the way individuals dress, and act (Jackson 2009, 153). It is these heteronormative assumptions that result in gender stereotypes that render invisible any domestic violence that deviates from what is expected. This is problematic for recognizing lesbian domestic violence, both within lesbian relationships (Donovan and Hester 2010, 284; Hassouneh and Glass 2008, 316), and in having it acknowledged by service care providers outside of the relationship (Little and Terrence 2010, 430; Ristock 2002, 97).

What are the Current Policy Responses to the ‘Problem’?

Do current policies focus on target groups?

The policy ‘others’ particular groups by listing them as more vulnerable to domestic abuse, and therefore, target populations. The groups targeted as ‘vulnerable’ in the current Action Plan include: Aboriginals, elderly women, women with a disability, immigrant women, women from cultural communities, lesbians, gay, bisexual, transsexual and transgender women as well as male victims (Quebec 2012, Message from the Ministers). This is problematic because it constructs domestic violence as ‘different’ in any groups that are not the dominant norm. It is a way of excluding them, and by indicting they need the measures in the policy to be “adapted” (Quebec 2012, 6, 11) to their realities, it is implying that they are not “the same.” This is different from arguing that a different understanding of the experiences of domestic violence in “vulnerable” populations is necessary. The former is a way of exclusion by dominant sources of power, and the latter is being inclusive by recognizing their needs and experiences are different. This can be further explained using Iris Young’s (1990) concept of cultural imperialism.
According to Young (1990), cultural imperialism means to “experience how dominant meanings of society render the particular perspective of one’s own group invisible at the same time as they stereotype one’s group and mark it out as the other” (58). Invisibility results when the dominant group fails to incorporate the experiences of others, and marginalizes them instead. They become “deviant in relation to the dominant norm” (123). Therefore, a universal policy that is meant to apply to everyone, according to Young (1990), or in the case of Quebec’s domestic violence policy, “adapt” to the realities of the “vulnerable” populations, is placing them at a further disadvantage by not acknowledging they have different needs.

Are target groups stigmatized by existing policy responses?

There are multiple ways that the policy responses either marginalize or stigmatize “vulnerable” populations. For example, the policy states it will “produce and distribute information and awareness-raising brochures” (Quebec 2012, 6) to vulnerable populations. While these brochures are found on the Secrétariat a la condition féminine’s website, they are not easily accessible unless one is aware of both the brochures and the website. A general internet search is less likely to lead to the brochures without this information. This contrasts with the accessibility of domestic violence information with a heteronormative framework found on any Quebec government website addressing domestic violence. For example, a general internet search of domestic violence in Quebec will more likely lead to information that reflects the “public story”, such as the Quebec government’s resource page on domestic violence (http://domesticviolence.gouv.qc.ca/need_resources.php).

The policy also states it will “support the design and production of awareness-raising tools and information on domestic violence addressed to people from sexual minorities” (Quebec 2012, 6). The responsibility to produce this information is assigned to the Bureau de Lutte Contre l’Homophobie and the Ministère de la Justice (6). This is problematic because even though the former is where research on the LGBTQ community often occurs, supporting awareness-raising tools is a passive intervention that minimizes the importance of understanding how sexual minorities experience domestic violence. Instead, the policy could support the Bureau de Lutte Contre l’Homophobie to research the experiences of domestic violence in sexual minorities in order to determine necessary interventions and to find prevalence rates.

Finally, the policy states it will provide immigrants and people from cultural communities information and awareness-raising tools that are directed towards victims (Quebec 2012, 6), provide information on Quebec values (8) and provide immigrants with leaflets on domestic violence (8). The problem with this, in addition to conflating immigrants and cultural communities, is that the policy intervention presupposes that immigrants and/or individuals from cultural communities are more likely to experience domestic violence, therefore, increasing the risk they will be stigmatized as a result. Additionally, there is no mention of sexual orientation.

How do existing policies address, maintain or create inequities between different groups?

One of the primary ways that the domestic violence policy maintains inequities between different groups is by emphasizing the importance of promoting equality between men and women. For
example, the policy states that “gender equality is the primary condition for elimination of domestic violence” (Quebec 2012, 2). One of the objectives of the policy is to promote egalitarian relationships between men and women, and girls and boys (Quebec 2012, 5). By indicating that equality between men and women will eliminate domestic violence, it is a heteronormative assumption that most individuals involved in domestic violence are in heterosexual relationships, and that gender is the most important inequality. Egalitarian relationships are certainly important; however, if egalitarian relationships are promoted between women and men, then those attracted to the same-sex are not receiving the message that their relationships are also important, and abuse does occur in same-sex relationships. Therefore, it is important to include same-sex relationship information in order to normalize their relationships and to promote egalitarian relationships.

**What Inequities Actually Exist in Relation to the ‘Problem’?**

*What are the important intersecting social locations and systems?*

The policy fails to consider that two or more of the ‘vulnerable’ populations may intersect, or that there are possible connections with domestic violence and racism, heterosexism, colonialism, ableism, and/or gender identity. All of these factors will alter how domestic violence is experienced. Even when the intersection of gender and sexual orientation is acknowledged (lesbians), this is the only intersection considered.

Lesbian is often understood as white and middle class (Holmes 2009, 80; Russo 2001, 59): a depiction that marginalizes many lesbians, and their experiences. Additionally, prioritizing the need to address heterosexism in lesbian domestic violence is excluding other forms of oppression such as racism, ageism, and classism (Russo 2001, 59). If white, middle-class lesbian domestic violence is invisible in policy, then the level of invisibility of lesbians not identifying this way is much greater. Intersectionality, therefore, can help identify some of these issues. For example, intersectionality may aid in understanding that domestic violence as a hidden phenomenon is part of the white, middle-class story because white, middle-class women have “been able to claim the privilege of privacy” (Holmes 2009, 85). Intersectionality will also expose that lesbian domestic violence is naturalized in racial and lower-class groups because violence is more common, accepted, and visible for lesbians of color, and working-class lesbians (Holmes 2009, 85). This is important because naturalizing violence not only stereotype lesbians of color and working-class lesbians as more prone to violence, but it will also make it more difficult to recognize domestic violence in their relationships. This is why it is essential to consider that not all experiences follow a heteronormative framework, and that adapting policy measures for ‘vulnerable’ populations is insufficient to address their needs.

*What are the knowledge/evidence gaps about this problem across the diversity of the population?*

Due to the necessity of evidence-based policy, much attention is given to finding a prevalence rate to legitimate lesbian domestic violence as a ‘real’ problem (Ristock 2002, 10). Many studies attempt to provide some type of prevalence rate (Donovan & Hester 2014; Holmes 2009; Little & Terrence 2010;
Walters 2011); however, as Edwards et al. (2015) highlight, the estimates of domestic violence range from one percent to more than ninety-seven percent (113). This becomes problematic because if there is no substantive evidence for lesbian domestic violence, then it is more difficult to contend that this is a policy issue. Overcoming this evidence gap may require addressing some of the barriers that prevent finding an accurate prevalence rate. Some of these barriers include underreporting (Little & Terrence 2010, 430), use of standardized measures designed for heterosexual samples (Badenes-Ribera et al. 2015, 48), and not assessing the gender of the perpetrator (Balsalm 2001, 26).

What are Feasible Long and Short-Term Solutions?

What is most important in terms of combating domestic violence is not only recognizing that it extends beyond the dominant heterosexual framework, but also integrating the knowledge and experiences of those in the ‘vulnerable’ groups without stereotyping or ‘othering’ them. Young (1990) states that “groups cannot be socially equal unless specific experience, culture, and social contributions are policy affirmed and recognized” (174). Adapting interventions that are originally meant for those who are included in the dominant frame of domestic violence is not being inclusive, it is assimilation. Including the experiences of lesbians and other vulnerable groups requires a long-term commitment to research the experiences of different people, collect disaggregated data on domestic violence, work with the respective communities to understand how it is experienced differently, and formulate solutions based on this information. Is it feasible? The policy does indicate that it will support research on domestic violence in vulnerable populations (Quebec 2012, 18), therefore, it depends on the amount of commitments the Quebec government is willing to make.

In terms of short term solutions, one of the additions to the policy that can be included is the threat of ‘outing’ as a form of abuse in the definition of domestic violence. Threatening to disclose someone’s sexual orientation is a prominent form of abuse, one that forces the abused to decide whether to leave the relationship or to seek assistance (Walters 2011, 253; West 2002, 123). The fact that it is not mentioned (Quebec 2012, 1) suggests that the experiences of same-sex domestic violence is not considered. Therefore, adding this to the policy is not only feasible, but it will acknowledge that there are some types of abuse not found in heterosexual relationships.

How will the Proposed Policy Responses Reduce Inequities?

How will you ensure that the proposed options do not reinforce existing stereotypes or produce further inequities for some populations?

Young (1997) states that by differentiating social groups, there is the risk that experiences of some group members will be normalized, while others will be excluded (388). This has already been illustrated with the example provided by Holmes (2009) that showed how lesbian domestic violence studies are based on white middle class lesbians, marginalizing lesbians who do not ‘fit’ this model. However, if an intersectional approach is used to research lesbian domestic violence and understand it
from all social locations and with the intersecting factors that accompany these locations, then the risk of marginalizing the experiences of any lesbians will decline.

There is the possibility that focusing on difference will further marginalize and/or stereotype lesbians; however, the problem with this is not focusing on ‘difference’, but when these differences are reduced to a single factor rather than trying to understand them. Including difference must move beyond mere ‘recognition’ and include understanding differences, how they are problematic, and how they are experienced. Difference goes beyond recognition, and until effort is made to incorporate this knowledge, to learn and understand this knowledge, difference will be stereotyped and marginalized. Does that mean that those who are “different” should try to “fit” in instead? They will be forced to assimilate because dominant society is incapable, or perhaps, unwilling to accept difference.

Conclusion

My analysis illustrated the need for intersectionality in Quebec domestic violence policy. It revealed that not only are lesbians collectively invisible in the policy, but that the differences among lesbians also need to be recognized to truly understand their experiences. An intersectional-based policy analysis exposed the ways that lesbian domestic violence is invisible due to a heteronormative framework. Simply naming a group in the policy, listing them as “vulnerable”, and treating them as a homogeneous unit is insufficient for visibility. This is simply another way of reinforcing their marginal status by insisting they “adapt” to the dominant framework so that they “fit” within existing policy. An intersectional analysis revealed that domestic violence can be experienced in different ways, and that anyone who deviates from the dominant framework is at risk of having their experiences reduced to a common factor, such as being a member of a “vulnerable” population, rather than being understood. The question that remains is: even if an intersectional policy analysis reveals differences, how can policy change to incorporate them?

One of the first steps towards improving policy is research that “can serve as an intellectual basis for more thoughtful deliberation” (Manuel 2006, 196). Research that can accomplish this will permit inclusion, and this requires developing a separate, intersectional framework to analyse and understand lesbian domestic violence, and then push for that knowledge to inform domestic violence policy. A separate understanding of lesbian domestic violence is necessary in order to understand all the factors involved, as well as the power dynamics (Ristock 2002, 180). Once we have research that will provide a more accurate depiction not only of lesbians, but all Canadians, then this information can inform policy resulting in policies that are representative of everyone’s experiences. The key to ensuring that this research is considered in domestic violence policy is recognizing that the ‘public story’ of domestic violence prioritizes white, middle-class, heterosexual women at the exclusion of other women.

Moving beyond the “public story” is important to prevent the marginalization of different groups in domestic violence policy. Lesbians will continue to be abused regardless of what the policy states, however, without it being addressed more thoroughly in the policy, little resources and support will be directed towards the lesbian community. Universal domestic violence policy does not accurately
reflect the realities of all people who experience domestic violence, and much more effort needs to be made to address this. It is only with visibility that lesbians and their relationship issues, such as domestic violence will be recognized, and this as a step closer to social acceptance, to policy inclusion and recognition beyond naming.
References


