

Engaging Men Across the Violence Prevention Continuum: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract: *Men have a role to play in the prevention of violence against women; however, there is increasing awareness that the social service sector has failed to adequately engage men in violence prevention programming and advocacy. This study used semi-structured interviews to explore the challenges that a sample of Canadian violence prevention practitioners and organizations face in engaging men in preventing violence and generating practice recommendations for what is needed to better equip practitioners. At an organizational level, findings indicate that more capacity-building around emerging research, strategies, and tools in working with and engaging men in the prevention of violence is required. Challenges around recruiting male staff, in what is primarily considered a female-dominated profession, were also noted. Practitioners also discussed the role of masculine gender norms as barriers to men's help-seeking and engagement in violence prevention advocacy. Recommendations include expanding social work curriculum and training to include information and resources on working with men, as well as increased research on best and promising practices to support organizations and practitioners in their engagement efforts.*

Keywords: *Violence prevention; men and masculinity; social work training, intimate partner violence*

Through the highly visible movements such as #MeToo and #TimesUp, there is increased public awareness of the prevalence of violence against women as well as the role men can play across the violence prevention continuum. This continuum spans from primary prevention, focused on the promotion of healthy and positive constructs of masculinity, through crisis intervention and re-building lives, where the focus is on working with perpetrators and supporting victims in long-term healing and well-being (Flood, 2019; Wolfe & Jaffe, 1999). Engaging men in violence prevention efforts can have positive and transformational impacts not only in the lives of women and girls, but also in the lives of men and boys by freeing them from harmful and rigid aspects of traditional masculinities (Casey et al., 2013; Flood, 2019; Minerson et al., 2011) that reinforce violence and sexism (Harvey et al., 2007; Kaufman, 2001).

While the “why” of engaging men across the violence prevention continuum is abundantly clear, less is known about “how” to do this work in ways that are meaningful and effective (Casey et al., 2018; Chovanec, 2012; Donovan & Griffiths, 2015; Wells et al., 2015). Research indicates that men are less likely than women to engage in help-seeking behaviors and/or structured social supports and services (Buston, 2018; Douglas & Hines, 2011; Drapeau et al., 2009; Meyer, 2019; Pfitzner et al., 2017). This tendency

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Copyright © 2021 Authors, Vol. 21 No. 1 (Spring 2021), 199-216, DOI: 10.18060/24458



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may explain why male recruitment for, and participation in violence prevention supports and services can be challenging (Donovan & Griffiths, 2015; Kosberg, 2002). Masculine gender norms that emphasize self-reliance, toughness, and autonomy (Levant et al., 2012) have been identified as variables that negatively affect men's decisions to engage with prevention supports and services (Messing et al., 2015; Meyer, 2019; Shafer & Wendt, 2015). Nevertheless, there is increasing awareness that the social service sector has failed to develop supports and services that adequately meet the needs of men (Baum, 2016; Donovan & Griffiths, 2015; Kosberg, 2002). While there is some research examining men's reasons for not seeking out or using violence prevention supports and services (Cheung et al., 2009; Donovan & Griffiths, 2015; Douglas & Hines, 2011; Machado et al., 2017; Tsui, 2014; Tsui et al., 2010), little research has focused on the challenges faced by social service practitioners and organizations in offering and developing gender-responsive services for men across the prevention continuum (Kosberg, 2002).

This paper presents findings from an exploratory study focused on understanding the challenges that a Canadian sample of violence prevention practitioners and organizations face in meeting the needs of men in the area of violence prevention and intervention supports and services. Potential opportunities for developing or enhancing prevention and intervention supports and services to better support men's needs are discussed, and recommendations for social work practice, policy, and research are offered.

Domestic and Sexual Violence Supports and Services

Male Perpetrators of Violence

While a multi-pronged approach that includes the engagement of men across the prevention continuum through the promotion of healthy and positive constructs of masculinity has been called for (Flood, 2019; Katz, 1995; Kaufman, 2001), much of the research, services, and supports have been directed towards men as perpetrators of violence (as opposed to victims, allies, leaders, and violence disrupters) (Baum, 2016; Kosberg, 2002). Batterer Intervention Programs (BIPs) have generally been the most developed support for helping men end abusive behaviors, with the majority of men who participate being court-mandated to do so (Carter, 2010; Messing et al., 2015). Despite their proliferation, however, there remains varying evidence of their effectiveness (Arias et al., 2013; Babcock et al., 2004; Feder & Wilson, 2005; Gondolf, 2012). Research in this area hypothesizes that failure to tailor services to meet the clients' specific needs, such as addressing substance misuse, psychological problems, or both, may influence program effectiveness (Messing et al., 2015; Stuart, 2005; Stuart et al., 2007). Research also suggests that high non-completion rates may be due to the fact that many supports and services treat men as a homogenous group, as opposed to individuals with unique issues and experiences that vary across the lifespan (Lehmann & Simmons, 2009; Messing et al., 2015; Stuart, 2005). For example, Gondolf (2012) suggests that treatment may be more effective when practitioners and program participants share similarities, such as language, race, and/or ethnicity. Stuart (2005) suggests that practitioners should develop a range of services that balances treatment with individual contexts and variability.

Male Victims of Violence

There has been some attention paid by scholars to how male victims of domestic and sexual violence use services and how helpful men perceive those services to be. Victimization of males, however, generally continues to be overlooked (Elkins et al., 2017) resulting in limited availability of supports and services (Cheung et al., 2009; Douglas & Hines, 2011; Machado et al., 2017; Tsui et al., 2010). Studies repeatedly show the difficulties faced by male victims in accessing domestic and sexual violence supports and services (Cheung et al., 2009; Douglas & Hines, 2011; Elkins et al., 2017; Machado et al., 2017; Tsui, 2014; Tsui et al., 2010). In a cross-sectional study on the helpfulness of domestic violence services, male victims overwhelmingly ranked the existing services as not helpful, with those specifically offered by shelters being ranked the least helpful among all supports and services (i.e., counseling, legal, medical, helplines, services related to substance abuse, shelter, and other services; Tsui, 2014). In a 2011 study conducted by Douglas and Hines in the U.S., findings showed that men who seek help for domestic violence victimization have the least positive experiences with service providers in the domestic violence service system. The authors recommended increased training for domestic violence system practitioners about the diversity of domestic violence victims and advocated for re-examining family violence curricula in social work education (Douglas & Hines, 2011).

Like the research on BIPs, there appears to be very limited research from the perspective of practitioners who do work with male victims of violence. Tsui et al. (2010) conducted a study of domestic violence service organizations to understand what service providers identify as the reasons that male victims do not access social services provided by the community. Findings showed that most domestic violence services targeted female clients, and there was an acknowledgement of limited appropriate services for male victims. In their qualitative study of practitioners working with male victims, Hogan et al. (2012) concluded that aside from therapy, there is a lack of supports and services for male victims. The study participants were unaware of specific programs to refer their clients to, demonstrating a need for the development of more services for this population (Hogan et al., 2012). As with perpetrators of violence, male victims are not a homogenous group and there is a need to develop a range of appropriate supports that recognize the heterogeneity of male victims.

Male Allies, Leaders, Bystanders, and Disrupters

Violence prevention practice has evolved from approaches tailored just for women to approaches that aim to transform relations, social norms, and systems to promote and uphold gender inequality and violence (Jewkes et al., 2015). Across the globe, engaging men in violence prevention work has become a priority in government and community prevention efforts (Casey et al., 2013; Flood, 2019; Wells et al., 2015; Wells & Fotheringham, 2021). In many cases, these approaches work to build a critical consciousness among men about the prevalence and impact of violence against women, as well as supporting men to understand the links between the embodiment of traditional forms of masculinity, male privilege, and violence perpetration. Such efforts aim to

highlight the positive role men can play in addressing and disrupting other men's abusive behavior (Casey, 2010).

Organizations are increasingly using a variety of approaches and strategies to engage men as allies and bystanders through group education, community outreach, and community mobilization initiatives (Carlson et al., 2015; Wells et al., 2015; Wells & Fotheringham, 2021). Despite this increased focus on engaging men, there is limited research on the different strategies used by organizations in their work, and on the challenges that organizations face in engaging men in violence prevention efforts (Carlson et al., 2015; Casey, 2010; Casey et al., 2013). Casey (2010) identified several challenges related to engaging men in violence prevention efforts, such as (1) using non-personalized approaches (flyers, posters, and other non-individualized invitations); (2) not identifying with the messenger (perceived identity and/or age of violence prevention messengers may impact the ability to engage men); and, (3) lack of available and accessible violence prevention groups in some communities. In their study of organizations doing this work across the globe, Casey et al., (2013) found fragmented support and services and limited or narrow models for effectively engaging men in violence prevention. The authors also conclude that developing or tailoring existing services to be culturally and contextually appropriate while still meeting funding expectations of evidence and rigor can be challenging (Casey et al., 2013).

Study Purpose

While the research base examining the engagement of men across the violence prevention continuum is emerging, few studies have focused on how to design appropriate programs for men or on understanding how to create organizational cultures and strategies that engage men effectively. To this end, this study examined narrative data from interviews with key representatives from the domestic and sexual violence sector in Calgary, Alberta to better understand these challenges and to identify possible solutions to more effectively engage and support men across the violence prevention continuum. Specifically, this study aimed to (a) describe the primary challenges experienced by service providers in designing strategies and programs for men, (b) identify the organizational strategies and cultures that engage men in violence prevention work, and (c) examine the opportunities for social workers and the human services sector to better serve men across the prevention continuum. This study was approved by the University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Board.

Method

In late 2017, representatives from agencies and institutions throughout the violence prevention sector in Calgary, Alberta approached a member of the Faculty of Social Work explaining they were experiencing more men trying to access local domestic and sexual violence supports and services. Representatives also shared that they were experiencing challenges with (a) how to design and offer programs and supports for men, (b) how to create strategies within their organizations to engage and work with men, and (c) how to curate organizational cultures that integrate men into workplaces traditionally dominated

by women. In response to this issue, *Shift: The Project to End Domestic Violence* launched a research project to collect information to help identify high-priority and emergent service and capacity gaps related to men's violence prevention needs with the hope of mobilizing government and community partners to more effectively address these gaps.

The first author undertook a series of interviews with key individuals working in Calgary's domestic and sexual violence sector to better understand these challenges and to identify possible solutions to more effectively support men across the violence prevention continuum (men as victims, perpetrators, allies, leaders, and violence disrupters). The interviews were designed to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the primary challenges experienced by service providers in designing strategies and programs for men?
2. What are the primary challenges experienced by service providers responding to men as clients?
3. What are examples of promising practices, emergent approaches, or identified successes in responding to men as clients?
4. What future initiatives are planned that target survivors, perpetrators, or violence disrupters who are men?

An e-mail invitation was sent out to the Calgary Domestic Violence Collective – a local voluntary initiative that has over 70 partners from multiple sectors. In total, 16 individuals from 13 organizations responded to the invitation to participate. Interview participants were provided with an informed consent form which was signed and returned prior to participation. Participants were also provided with the interview guide in advance so that they could consider the questions in greater detail and retrieve any relevant agency data in advance of the interview.

Thirteen interviews with 16 individuals took place. Ten interviews were conducted one-on-one, and three interviews each included two participants. Interviews ranged from 25 to 55 minutes, with an average length of 40 minutes. All interviews were conducted by phone and followed the semi-structured interview guide found in Table 1. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and subsequently analyzed using NVivo11.

The 13 organizations who participated all serve men who occupy at least one of the roles along the violence prevention continuum—perpetrators, victims, allies, leaders, and/or violence disrupters. Out of 16 participants who participated in the interviews, 50% were directors (n=8, including seven directors of programs/services and one executive director), 25% were coordinators or managers (n=4, including three coordinators and one manager), and 25% were frontline staff (n=4, including two counsellors, one specialist, and one practitioner). Almost all of the participants (n=12) were women. This sample is congruent with studies showing that social work as a profession is predominantly female (Salsberg et al., 2017), and that the nonprofit sector overall is comprised of a female-majority workforce (Ontario Nonprofit Network, 2018).

Thematic analysis was used to make sense of and interpret the data. Thematic analysis is a flexible analytic method that operates independent of theory yet provides rich and detailed accounts of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For this project, the data were reviewed

several times by the first two authors to gain a general understanding of the scope and contexts of the data and how they relate to the study questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Following this, an initial structural coding frame was established by the first two authors. Structural coding is a first cycle coding method that follows the layout of the interview questionnaire, designating question-based codes that allow data to be analyzed in relation to the question from which they were collected (Namey et al., 2008). Once all of the data were sufficiently coded in this manner, the first author conducted a second cycle of coding focused on developing descriptive codes that summarized the primary topic of the data excerpts (Saldana, 2009). In some instances, this involved applying more than one code to a segment of data and reconfiguring codes where necessary. This resulted in a final coding frame being applied to the full dataset. At this point, the second author reviewed how the final coding frame had been applied to all of the transcripts.

Once coded, the dataset was analyzed for semantic themes. Semantic thematic analysis looks at the “explicit or surface meanings of the data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84) and aims to move beyond pure description of the data into interpretation. Themes were determined based on their richness and relevance to the data and the project purposes, as well as their applicability to the dataset as a whole. The first and second author reviewed each of the themes together to ensure agreement. A report was completed and sent out to all participants to provide any clarifications on the presentation of quotes and subsequent findings.

Findings

In the following section, findings from the interviews are presented. The section is organized according to the respective research question, with an exploration of key themes that correspond to each question.

Primary Challenges Experienced by Service Providers

Agencies in the violence prevention sector experience several challenges designing supports and services for men. Overall, most organizations feel like they are doing a good job at meeting the needs of their clients, including those clients who are men; however, there was a general sentiment amongst the interview participants that there are opportunities for growth and improvement. As one individual said, their agency is focusing on “not bigger, not broader, but better,” highlighting how they intend to take the solid foundation of their service offerings and enhance them to better serve all genders. The participants did, however, highlight some of their agencies’ needs that would help serve this purpose.

Capacities to do this work. Many of the agencies identified an ongoing need for training, saying that the violence prevention sector has typically focused on women; men are a relatively recent target for programs and services in this field. As such, there was a sense that new research, strategies, and tools are increasingly emerging and there was a desire to stay on top of these new, promising, and best practices. One participant commented:

I think just everybody should be in ongoing training so it is continuous, and especially in this kind of work where you are talking about violence. Every year we should be updating our practices. So, if five years from now I am still doing the same thing I did five years ago I am in trouble; I haven't evolved.

This was affirmed by other participants, one of whom said that their staff need “specific education or tools around working with men,” while a participant from a different agency commented that, “I think that moving forwards, we are needing and wanting some more of those specific, in-depth tools to deal with some of these things.” It was not always clear from the interviews what this education or these tools may target, and one program coordinator commented that she would be curious to know “the breadth” or “option menu of how to start to meet [men’s] needs.”

Access to Knowledge. In line with the need for capacity building, some participants highlighted their lack of access to new knowledge, particularly contemporary research related to the best practices for supporting men, as a challenge to designing services for men. Most organizations hire staff whose skills are tailored to working with clients in front line roles and not necessarily to reviewing, interpreting, synthesizing, and incorporating research into programs. As one program manager said, “It is tough because I think we do the best we can and when we have male clients we try and keep up-to-date on the literature and the resources, and there are more programs popping up....” Another program manager commented that:

A product coming out of this [research] that we could benefit greatly from is a vetted resource list. A resource list of places we can send people where we know those people have met some kind of criteria, and the development of what that criteria should be. Like what do people have to have in order to support people who need support?

A similar request was made for “any information or resources or research we can get around other places who are doing similar work.” Several participants commented about engaging with contemporary research or the desire to engage with evidence; however, it was evident that there is a need for support around synthesizing, disseminating, and integrating new knowledge into practice as it becomes available.

Engaging Men in Violence Prevention Activities. Many of the participants highlighted the challenge of engaging men across the continuum of violence prevention work. There are conflicting and uncertain views amongst service providers about the best approach to engage men as clients and whether agencies need to have materials tailored for men. In some instances, service providers said that men need specific programming, messaging, materials, and approaches that have been designed to cater to men. This uncertainty around targeting men was highlighted by one program coordinator who stated:

We recognize – and maybe we are wrong in this, so part of what we need to know is if our assumptions are wrong – our assumption right now is that men aren't going to access programming in the same way our female-identified clients are. What we need to know is, we need to be able to test that assumption to say, is that

in fact true? Will male-identified clients access programming differently, and if so, how? What does that difference look like?

In other instances, service providers stated that presenting gender-neutral messages and materials is sufficient to engage men: “I think we target men. When you look at our website it doesn’t have women on it.”

Although some agencies are taking purposeful action to engage men, most are unsure about the effectiveness of those actions beyond anecdotes. One participant mentioned that they are interested in better understanding:

Some of the longer-term engagement stuff – like how [men] come in; what keeps them there; how to know that, because of what [services] they are engaged in, they are doing better. Like, some of those things are so unclear to me because it is kind of new.

Beyond finding useful mechanisms to disseminate information about engaging men, it would be helpful to support agencies to better evaluate and collect data about the effectiveness of their efforts so that those efforts can be enhanced or adjusted if necessary.

Recruiting Men as Staff. Engaging men in violence prevention work across the continuum is about more than just the clients; effective staffing is also critical. For example, some service providers suggested that men may respond better to services delivered by men. In more than one instance, the interview participants highlighted this as a specific question they would like answered: “That is one of the questions, you know, do you really have a female running that [program] or does it need to be a man?” A number of participants reported that their agency is struggling to hire and retain men as staff. The notion of a sector dominated by women was often mentioned, and this poses problems when some service providers believe that clients who are men should be served by staff who are men. One participant stated, “Can we find a man with the right qualifications because there are fewer of them in the field... and then the assumption is, whether it is true or not, that men should be working with men.” Similarly, another participant said,

If we were to get into programming [for men], one of the first steps that we would need to look at is bringing on a coordinator that is male-identified for any direct service work that we are doing. Just the same as we have the rule that, [for] any direct service work for female-identified individuals, we have a female-identified coordinator, and I would want to have the same thing when we start to do men’s programming.

The difficulty in recruiting men was further affirmed by other participants: “Our shortage of male staff is not a principle-based thing, it is a circumstantial thing. A high percentage of social workers are not men.” Thus, for agencies who seek to match the gender of their staff with the gender of their clients, finding qualified gender-matched service providers can be difficult.

Responding to Diversity Among Men. One of the recurring challenges experienced by many agencies is their ability to respond to men who come from

diverse backgrounds, specifically racially and ethnoculturally diverse communities. This was emphasized not only by those agencies who primarily serve ethno-cultural communities, but also by agencies who serve a more general population as well. For example, one participant stated: "...we are all primarily English speakers so that rules out a whole bunch of people right there as patients and clients." Beyond language, there are cultural nuances related to the constructions of masculinity (and masculinities) in non-Canadian cultures that may present challenges for service providers who lack familiarity. In one interview, for example, the participant recounted cases of a client whose experiences of victimization were linked with their role reversal when immigrating to Canada, whereby the man's wife had greater autonomy and access to financial resources. In this instance, the wife used financial control as a form of violence against the man, who experienced vulnerability from his inability to find employment upon resettlement. For organizations that do not have the language skills, cultural knowledge, or understanding of the struggles related to immigration, the ability to support ethno-culturally diverse men may be diminished.

Primary Challenges Responding to Men as Clients

Work in the violence prevention sector is complex and often involves supporting clients in crisis who have experienced, or are experiencing, trauma. The work, by nature, also places tension between individuals, evidenced in the oppositional labeling of persons as "victims" or "offenders." Service providers work with these persons as they occupy these roles, responding to their client as a victim of another, or as someone who has offended another. In this work, service providers experience challenges responding to male clients who are victims, perpetrators, allies, and violence disrupters.

Acknowledging Trauma and the Impact on Practice. Many practitioners and their supervisors acknowledged that the violence prevention sector has traditionally employed women to serve clients who are women and whose need for services have often been precipitated by experiences of victimization by men. As a result, some service providers may experience challenges working with men on subjects related to violence because of the inherited trauma from working with their clients who are women or, in some instances, from trauma related to their own experiences of violence. One program coordinator stated,

As a woman engaged in this work, you know, most women have been impacted by violence, on some scale or another. Some are further away from it than others, and being able to kind of recognize your ability to wade into this work with that and knowing what you need to do to protect yourself is huge, right?

This comment is affirmed by other participants, who shared that, "It can be triggering for people working with men who are - quote unquote - 'violent' as we are a female-dominated field" and "... you often have to have worked through your own stuff a little bit otherwise you get triggered and perhaps bring stuff into the room that isn't about the patient." Thus, people working in the violence prevention sector, and particularly those who are women, acknowledge the role that trauma plays in their own lives as service providers, thereby underpinning both the need for self-care, but also the need for reflexive practice so as to prevent that trauma from impacting the support provided to clients who are men.

Need for Greater Examination of Individual Biases. Most of the interviews touched on the importance of recognizing, reflecting upon, and unpacking individual biases related to working with men. These biases are intimately connected to individual and inherited trauma and may present challenges for service providers who work with men as clients. A number of participants, however, highlighted how they have engaged in the personal reflexive work to unpack these biases and, in at least one instance, the participant highlighted how being given the space and support to do this reflexive work was a strength of her organization that enabled her to better support her clients. One front line provider said,

I had to work on my own bias and think about, 'What bias do I have about men?' in case I need to work with this. I identified a couple of things you know. I am very good at connecting with women, single women, because part of my own history of domestic violence.

Another program manager highlighted how critical it is that service providers undertake reflexive practice, noting that:

If you have not done your unlearning work around what it takes to be a man or a woman in this work you are going to do harm, so don't do it. People don't like hearing that, but I think it actually requires a ton of emotional labor and work for [service providers] to do this without possibly screwing shit up worse than it already is.

One thing that is evident from the interviews is that many service providers felt supported in working through their biases, although how that support is manifested remains unclear.

Stigma Related to Masculine Gender Norms. One of the challenges service providers face in supporting men across the violence prevention continuum is addressing the stigma men experience related to their masculinities. Many of the participants commented on this notion of masculine gender norms. In particular, participants discussed how men do not necessarily access services presenting with “violence” as their primary need. In some instances, men may present with other concerns or emotions, which one service provider referred to as an “iceberg” – giving the sense that what is easily apparent with men may conceal the larger, underlying body of needs. Other participants discussed how men who access services may face stigma associated with exposing vulnerabilities or with failing to provide for their families, both of which may be considered traditionally emasculating. This dynamic may be connected to the shame and embarrassment that participants cited as common emotions displayed amongst clients who are men. One participant commented that,

[Men] are not unaware that violence is part of the package, but that is not necessarily their primary concern. I wonder if that is because it is so stigmatized to talk about violence? You know, even the men who are forced to come talk about it, they will say they are very embarrassed about this.

Another participant shared, “You know, my experience is that the men are far more ashamed of their own behavior than people ever give them credit for,” acknowledging the centrality of shame in men’s experiences of violence. Service providers connected this

stigma, or stigmas, to men who have offended as well as to men who have been victimized. As another participant shared,

I think, definitely, there is a lot of stigma around men; how are men victims of domestic violence? A lot of people still view domestic violence as something that is physical and the way the domestic violence has been portrayed in the past is as battered women, and I don't think people really fully recognize yet that domestic violence can come in the form of financial abuse, using the kids against them, it can be emotional abuse, it can be withholding sex, there are so many different aspects that affect men that are not necessarily physical, and then yes, of course, there are physical instances as well.

For service providers working with men, understanding, and having the tools to navigate stigma and attendant feelings of shame and embarrassment can be challenging.

Understanding How Men Seek Services. Part of engaging men in violence prevention is understanding the nuances in how men seek out and access services and the coded language men use to articulate the struggles they are experiencing. There was disagreement in the interviews, however, on the extent to which men exhibit help-seeking attitudes and behaviors related to violence. Some participants mentioned that men are more inclined to ask for general help than they are to ask for a specific service or type of help. As one participant said: “They are not that specific, they really just say – the most common thing that somebody will ask me is ‘Can you help me figure out why I did this?’... That is their primary question and that is what they are asking for.” Another participant similarly commented, “[Men] won't state what it is they want initially... they don't state that from the get-go.” On the other hand, one participant stated that, “[Men] ask really, from their understanding, they ask for help to not do it again.” Decoding men's help-seeking language is one of the challenges providers face in determining what type of support men require.

According to the majority of participants, men present for services because of a number of motivating factors, ranging from personal motivations, to being requested (with varying degrees of consequence) by partners, to being mandated by courts or social systems (e.g., Child and Family Services). From the perspective of the interview participants, men who seek services are generally already at a place of crisis, either having offended or, as one participant said, being at a point in their relationship “where things are really tough... they want to fix a situation that has been a concern for many years or for a long period of time.” As another participant said, “often this is their last opportunity to kind of change and save their relationship.”

There are men, however, who seek services preventively, or who access services to become a better ally or bystander. Some participants shared accounts of men who, in seeking to become a better ally, recognize they are on the spectrum of violence as an offender or victim and thus they also experience a shift in how they understand their own experiences with violence. For some service providers, this can prove challenging as the support required by clients evolves after support has been initiated. The services accessed may no longer be appropriate and, in some cases, the agency may no longer be suitable (for

example, agencies that do not take men on as clients if they have been convicted of perpetrating violence).

Examples of Promising Practices and Emergent Approaches

Leveraging Informal Supports. The concept of informal or natural supports was mentioned numerous times by participants as an emergent area in which they are focusing their resources and attention. Many said that their programming encourages men to look at their informal contacts (friends, families, colleagues, neighbors, etc.) for further support, both while participating in services and after exiting them. For example, one provider stated that, “We often refer [clients] after individual counselling to look for their natural supports if they need further support.” Some service providers are actively working to enhance informal supports by working with those supporters and building their capacity to respond to disclosures of violence, while a few agencies identified this as an area of growth that they would like to develop.

Creating Cultures of Learning. Many participants commented about cultures of learning within their agencies, whether explicitly acknowledging ongoing training and education, or subtly commenting on the desire for enhanced trainings and development. In most cases, participants are eager for new information so that they can improve their own practice. One participant commented, “If you are an organization that believes that you actually don’t know everything and if there is space to be able to understand that, and to be able to recognize that, it will have impact.” By recognizing existing cultures of learning and working with this momentum, there may be greater potential to embed best and promising practices within organizations that have expressed an interest to grow in this area.

Discussion and Implications for Engaging Men Across the Violence Prevention Continuum

Given the emerging research examining the challenges faced by violence prevention practitioners and organizations in meeting the needs of men in violence prevention programs and services, this study offers important insights for developing or enhancing services to better support the needs of men. Based on the findings, we offer practice, organizational, and research implications that may impact social work education and practice.

Social Work Practitioner and Organizational Capacity

Based on interview data, it appears that capacity is a significant challenge in being able to engage men across the violence prevention continuum. Practitioners pointed to the lack of education, tools, and resources in relation to working with men, a finding supported by several scholars in the social work literature (Baum, 2016; Douglas & Hines, 2011; Kosberg, 2002; Shafer & Wendt, 2015). Expanding social work curriculum and training to include information and resources related to working with men is critical to enhancing prevention and intervention services (Douglas & Hines, 2011; Kosberg, 2002; Machado et

al., 2017). Incorporating topics such as men and masculinity, stigma related to help-seeking and masculine norms (Baum, 2016; Cheung et al., 2009), and ways to engage effectively with men in the beginning stages of support may be particularly important in better serving men across the violence prevention continuum.

Supporting processes that encourage the recognition, reflection, and unpacking of individual biases in relation to serving men is critical to ensuring practitioners engage meaningfully and effectively with clients who are men. As stated by Bellamy (2009), good social work practice with men not only affects individuals, but can produce positive systemic effects, given that the well-being of men is inherently connected with the well-being of women and children. Working with practitioners to acknowledge their own trauma history and responses, as well as how their experiences contribute to biases in relation to serving men, is essential to ensuring practitioners provide services and supports that uphold the dignity and worth of each individual, regardless of gender (Shafer & Wendt, 2015).

Organizationally, capacity-building efforts should be directed at building tools, programs, and resources for supporting ethno-culturally diverse men. Broader research consistently points to the fact that many programs and supports treat men as a homogenous group, as opposed to recognizing the diversity within and across groups of men (Douglas & Hines, 2011; Hogan et al., 2012; Lehmann & Simmons, 2009; Messing et al., 2015). Our interview participants corroborate this finding, suggesting that many agencies struggle to fully support men from diverse cultures and backgrounds. Examining the potential for partnerships with agencies that have expertise in serving ethno-cultural communities may be a way in which domestic and sexual violence organizations can better address the needs of men across the prevention continuum.

Organizational Staffing and Structure

The social work sector has long been a field dominated by women (Baum, 2016; Kosberg, 2002; Shafer & Wendt, 2015). Our findings support this view, with interview participants pointing to the challenges of recruiting men to their staff, and the desire to gender-match service providers with their clients. In addition to working with post-secondary institutions around recruitment of men to social work programs, organizations could work with other post-secondary programs that produce graduates with skills desirable for employment in the human services sector.

Research in Engaging and Supporting Men

Leveraging informal supports to support and engage men appears to be an emerging area of work for local domestic and sexual violence organizations. This finding contributes new knowledge to the scholarly body of work around engaging men across the violence continuum. Further research should be conducted to understand the work being done in the domestic and sexual violence sector that is specific to activating and leveraging informal supports for men.

Our findings clearly show a need and desire for current social work research on best and promising practices in relation to engaging men across the violence prevention continuum. Understanding the best approach to engaging men as clients, and what

resources, tools, and techniques are needed to keep them engaged was referred to by our participants. Literature is starting to build in this area, as is seen in research focused on fatherhood to engage men in preventing violence (Baum, 2016; Dozois et al., 2016; Pfitzner et al., 2017; Scourfield et al., 2012); however, more work is needed to support organizations in their efforts.

Limitations

The findings of this study are based on a relatively small, self-selected sample from one jurisdiction in Canada. While our exploratory research does correspond to and support other scholarly work published in the area of engaging men in violence prevention, it would be valuable to conduct research with a broad range of domestic and sexual violence representatives from multiple jurisdictions in order to expand knowledge in this area. Although the paucity of men working in this area may pose a barrier, future studies should dedicate increased effort to recruiting men working in the area of violence prevention. Lastly, while our study participants did not speak specifically to the needs of sexually and gender-diverse men in relation to interpersonal violence (IPV) services and supports, we believe this to be an area where more research is needed. Understanding the needs of gender and sexually diverse individuals will ensure their needs are being met and will support their engagement in violence prevention efforts.

Conclusion

Men are important stakeholders and co-beneficiaries of ending violence and, for this reason, understanding how to engage them in ways that are meaningful and effective is critically important. Participants in this study identified several challenges they face as practitioners and organizations in engaging men across the violence prevention continuum. However, they also highlighted important areas that warrant further research and development. Ensuring services are embedded in social work values that emphasize non-discriminatory concern for any individual or group in need is essential to ensuring the development and enhancement of violence prevention and intervention services to better support the needs and contributions of men.

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