

Hear Our Collective Voices!

Mother Survivors and Activist Movement to End Violence Against Women with Children

This article examines the experiences of women with children fleeing violence and survivor-activists in Ontario. Mothers are speaking out about systemic barriers and diminishing state support for women and their children fleeing violence within state systems responsible for protecting them. Lack of safe, affordable housing and universal child care supports and policing and child welfare interventions that fail to support women and their children's safety are most harshly realized by Indigenous, racialized, and low-income women with children seeking violence-free lives (Cull; Mann; Greaves et al.; Sinclair). Our aim is to shed light on state systems failing women with children fleeing violence; state policies retrenching race, gender, and class inequalities; and alternative accountability models for survivor-activists organizing to address systemic oppression. We argue that survivor activism in Ontario is crucial both within and outside the state to drive fundamental change and state accountability for violence against women at community and provincial levels.

Mothers are speaking out about systemic barriers and diminishing state support for women and their children fleeing violence, within a context of rising state collaborations and interventions. Lack of safe, affordable housing and universal child care supports; policing and legal systems that fail to support women and their children's safety; and punitive child welfare interventions that hold women responsible for protecting their children are most harshly realized by Indigenous, racialized, and low-income mothers seeking violence-free lives (Cull; Mann; Greaves et al.; Sinclair). The collective organizing by mother survivors of violence is evidence of a growing activist movement that is confronting systemic barriers in shelters, policing, and child welfare. Yet concerns are raised that feminist organizing within the antiviolenence movement cannot

deliver transformative change given the state's complicity in gender violence that props up racism, patriarchy, and the colonial project (Smith; Kim).

This article examines the experiences of women with children fleeing violence and survivor-activists in Ontario within the context of race, gender, and class oppressions in state systems responsible for protecting them. Our aim is to shed light on state systems failing women with children fleeing violence; state policies retrenching race, gender, and class inequalities; and alternative accountability models for survivor-activists organizing to address systemic oppression. To begin, Pat draws on her activist-informed doctoral research and a mother's narrative fleeing violence with her children to connect women's experiences of systemic oppression when fleeing violence with the rise of child-centric policies in Ontario that punish women for failing to protect their children. Paula's narrative in the second section highlights her experiences as a mother fleeing violence and as a survivor-activist organizing for social change to end violence against women. Eva's narrative elaborates on her experiences as an activist and frontline worker and witnessing the troubling trend of women with children fleeing violence becoming single mothers as the state removes their children, whom they deem at risk. To conclude, we examine alternative visions to address violence against women and children that include nonstate and hybrid accountability models. We argue that survivor activism in Ontario is crucial both within and outside the state to drive fundamental change and state accountability for violence against women at community and provincial levels. Transformative systemic change is only possible when mother survivor experiences and voices are moved from the margins to the centre of state policymaking.

What Are Mothers Saying? : Activist-Informed Research and State Policies to Address Violence against Women with Children

I had not initially set out to work with activist groups in my doctoral research concerned with violence against women, mother/child welfare and state policy. However, I met two survivor-activists, Eva from Windsor and Paula from Sault Ste. Marie, at the 2014 Ontario Association of Interval and Transition Houses (OAITH) Provincial Training Day in Toronto, Canada. This initial encounter coincided with the early days of my PhD fieldwork in August 2014. To recruit mothers for my research, I displayed "Tell your Story" posters in several Ontario shelters and organizations inviting mothers fleeing violence to participate in confidential interviews and focus groups. Paula's and Eva's leadership in their local communities and their connections to activist groups were instrumental in supporting mothers interested in participating in my research project. For example, as child care was a barrier for many women

wishing to participate, Paula and Eva arranged child care so the mothers could take part in interviews. Many mothers who participated in my research identified as Indigenous, Métis, racialized, and low income, which provided an important analysis of the intersectional oppressions of race, class, and gender for mothers fleeing violence.

In my study, women raised concerns about how state systems such as child welfare, women's shelters and policing were failing them, as this one mother's narrative highlights:

I kept trying to run away from this man. I kept trying to run and look where I am at. The abuser was charged once and he pled guilty and had his fifty dollar fine and that was it. Your stay in these shelters are so limited; you don't have the time to find stability. The thing you grab onto is probably the worst thing because it is unsafe or you don't have the money to even make it. But shelter staff are going to call CAS [Children's Aid Societies] every time you [the mother] call them [the shelter] and CAS are just going to make your life more difficult, which is exactly why women do not call [the shelter]. It is not worth it. I am not the only one who was in the women's shelter house, whose children were taken away because of the abuse they tried to prevent and get away from. (Low-income, Indigenous mother with three children)

Three state systems involved in providing coordinated services to protect this mother fleeing violence are failing her. Although the police and the criminal justice system were involved with charging and sentencing the abuser, the abuser faced few consequences and was out on the street reabusing the woman, while she continued to seek safety for her family. Women's shelters are no longer considered a safe support for this mother, as Children's Aid Societies were immediately called and as tragically revealed in her case, her children were removed from her care. This woman is less likely to seek safety at the shelter the next time she is abused, as in her words "it is not worth it."

Women's stories of systemic oppression in policing, the criminal justice system, child welfare, and women's shelters expose how state policies introduced over the last several decades to protect women with children from violence have further entrenched racial, gender, and class inequalities. For example, the introduction of Ontario legislation in the late 1990s to protect children from witnessing abuse and violence has ramped up CAS interventions into marginalized mother's lives who, according to the state, fail to protect their children (Strega et. al; Swift and Parada). The disproportionate number of Indigenous, immigrant, and racialized children in Ontario's child welfare systems evidences the racialized and gendered discrimination that women with children

encounter when fleeing violence (Cull; Swift and Parada). Furthermore, the introduction of Ontario's CAS-VAW collaborative agreements in 2004 between Children's Aid Societies and Violence against Women's agencies cemented a collaborative response between shelters, CAS, and police to address violence against women that focused on the at-risk child. As the mother's narrative highlights, child-centric initiatives have increasingly exposed women with children seeking safety and support to child welfare interventions that punish mothers for the gendered violence in their family's lives, often with the removal of their children from their care.

As state interventions in Ontario collaboratively ramp up to address violence against women, survivor-activists are speaking out against the race, class, and gender oppressions they encounter in state systems when seeking violence-free lives. Who then are the survivors in Ontario organizing for change to end violence against women with children? In the next two sections, Paula and Eva, respectively, outline their experiences as survivors and activists in state agencies and the antiviolence movement to reveal the tensions, road blocks, and possibilities in activist movement outside and inside the state.

What Happens after Survival? : Survivor Advocacy and the Freedom Sisters in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario

When I left my husband nine years ago, my only thought was how could I manage as a single mother on Ontario Works and still provide financially and emotionally for my two daughters when I felt damaged and broken from many years of abuse. Following custody battles, stalking by my abuser and CAS involvement, I had the responsibility to not only heal myself but find counselling services that would help my children cope with what we experienced. After my own healing journey, I was left with a burning need to be able to use my experience to help other women who were leaving a violent situation. My number one question was what can I do?

My need to do something to create change and awareness came in the form of an advocacy group for women survivors of domestic violence in northern Ontario. The group, the Freedom Sisters, Sault Ste. Marie (SSM), began in 2009 with a core membership of three women and has steadily grown to a group of ten women who continue to meet monthly. Our membership includes Métis and First Nations women, students, social workers, homemakers, retirees, and full- and part-time employees, the majority of whom have been or are single mothers who experienced violence. The early beginnings of the survivor group is attributed to Women in Crisis (Algoma), the local women's shelter. The shelter reached out to survivors in the Sault Ste. Marie community and invited them to participate at meetings to brainstorm needed change for survivors of

violence in the local community. A survivor advocacy group originated from these meetings. By 2012, the survivor group moved to a new location with a meeting space and a safe area for childcare. With funding from the Algoma Council of Domestic Violence (ACDV), this survivor advocacy group was able to provide supper and childcare to the women who attended these monthly meetings. In 2013, the survivor group formally became Freedom Sisters (SSM) and created the vision statement “to live in a society where survivors of abuse and violence are a memory” (Freedom Sisters SSM 1). Their goals of raising awareness, advocacy, and empowerment are reflected in the mission statement: “the purpose of Freedom Sisters (SSM) is to create awareness of violence against women; educate all people in the community from the survivor perspective; and to help women become empowered” (Freedom Sisters SSM 1).

Women in the Freedom Sisters have survived. Their survivor voices can share what it is like to sit in the back of a police car as a victim of domestic violence, to face the Children’s Aid worker who shows up at the door unannounced to do an investigation, to be stalked by her abuser, and to be so afraid her abuser will take her children that the mother allows the abuser to walk through peace bonds and protection orders. These mother survivors know how it feels to be forced to attend court and sit across from their abuser and feel such terror that they forget how to speak. These women know that sometimes the only reason they held on, the only reason that they made it through, was because of the small arms that hugged them good night and the hope for a better future for their children. The plunge into single parent status furthered the race, gender, and class oppression they faced in multiple state systems. For example, one Métis mother in Freedom Sisters who always worked part time had to turn to Ontario Works and apply for social housing after leaving her abusive partner. While the mother and her child struggled to survive in a new home, school, and community, the abusive partner continued with his usual life, living in their family home and working his full-time job, without providing financial support for his family.

A primary focus of Freedom Sisters SSM is community-based public education and awareness on the topic of violence through the survivors’ perspectives and the telling of individual survivor stories. At speaking engagements—such as International Women’s Day events and 6 December Day of Remembrance Events—women survivors share their personal stories of surviving abuse and the difficult process of leaving. The group annually participates in the Community Day parade in the summer and hands out positive affirmations to empower women and information about ending violence against women and children. Each November, the Freedom Sisters also organize the local Shine the Light Campaign in Sault Ste. Marie as part of a province-wide initiative to raise awareness about violence against women. The campaign encourages

residents and businesses to turn the community purple as a symbol of standing in solidarity with abused women seeking violence-free lives while it raises awareness of the community agencies supporting abused women (London Abused Women's Centre).

Addressing systemic barriers faced by women and mothers fleeing violence is another priority for the Freedom Sisters SSM, as women with children fleeing violence are encountering barriers within state-funded systems such as criminal justice, Children's Aid Societies, and policing. A major barrier for these women to participate at policy tables is the blame and shame mothers experience in the retelling of their story when accessing state systems. Rather than question where state systems have failed women and their families in keeping them safe, staff members in state systems often ask abused mothers "why did you stay," essentially blaming women for being in an abusive relationship. In telling their stories, women fear Children's Aid workers will apprehend their children and they will not be believed by CAS, particularly as many abusers use the child protection system as a form of terror and control against them. For example, one of the Freedom Sisters shared that her abusive ex-partner had called Children's Aid and made sixty false reports about her over a six-month period. When she tried to involve the police, she was told by police that this did not constitute harassment. When the mother questioned CAS about the harassment, they responded that "their hands were tied."

When Freedom Sisters are invited to policy tables, they often experience barriers for full inclusion, such as tokenism. For example, in 2013, the Freedom Sisters were invited to meet with the local MP to talk about violence against women. The women were excited to share their abuse experiences and have their voices heard by a local politician involved with a bill on domestic violence. However, rather than listen to their experiences of violence as part of the consultation process of his proposed bill, the MP was only interested in sharing the purpose of this bill with the Freedom Sisters. It was his hope to use the name of the group, Freedom Sisters, to provide backing for his bill that advanced his wife's work, not the experiences of survivors.

Financial barriers have also prevented Freedom Sisters from participating in policy development. The withdrawal of provincial funding from grassroots and other violence against women services has negatively impacted survivor-activist participation (Sinclair). For example, Legal Aid Ontario was organizing a 2016 regional meeting with domestic violence survivors, partners in the violence against women community, and other legal and community service providers to develop a strategy to expand and improve legal aid services for domestic violence survivors. Freedom Sisters contacted Legal Aid Ontario asking to participate, and they requested funding for travel expenses for some of the survivor-activists as the nearest locations were either four or eight hours away.

Although travel costs for professionals are typically covered by their respective agencies, women survivors, predominantly low income, were not supported by Legal Aid Ontario. Even though Legal Aid offered to include Freedom Sisters via video conference, and Freedom Sisters were in agreement, Legal Aid failed to follow up.

The Freedom Sisters are driving systemic change by retraining workers in state systems involved with domestic violence. The Freedom Sisters hosted their first conference “Supporting Voices in the North” in June 2016 after securing \$10,000 in funds from the Ministry of the Attorney General. The conference extended invitations for “trauma essentials” training to court workers, police services, victim support services, Children’s Aid Societies, Ontario Works, social housing workers, and women’s shelters. The conference emphasized how these groups’ domestic violence services are not meeting the broad and diverse needs of women fleeing violence. A central part of this training was the inclusion of the lived experiences of survivors who had been negatively impacted by many of these state-funded services. This two-day conference brought training on domestic violence and sexual violence to students, survivors, and fifty frontline workers from Indigenous and non-Indigenous women’s shelters and mental health services, and community-based criminal justice supports. Although the success of the conference signifies that survivors have the drive and capacity to create social change within state-service systems and through community-based advocacy, the absence of state employees from Children’s Aid Societies, court systems, and policing highlights the disconnect within and between state systems to actually listen to women survivors when they address the systemic barriers women encounter when fleeing violence.

Spiralling Out of Control in State Systems: From Single Mother to Single (Mother) ... to Survivor Inclusion

As a community activist and frontline worker in VAW and homeless shelters in Windsor, I see a troubling trend. Over the last decade, women with children fleeing violence have had their roles as mothers reduced from “mother” within a family context to “single mother” status when she leaves an abusive partner and finally to “single (mother)” when her children are apprehended by the state. Low-income, racialized, Indigenous women are the most marginalized as they make up the majority of single (mothers) whose children are in state care. Mothers with complex traumas, such as abuse, mental health or addictions issues, are more likely to be deemed unfit to parent, which increases the likelihood of CAS intervention (Swift and Prada). As shelters, CAS, and policing become more collaborative, coordinated, and interventionist, as revealed in Pat’s section on policy shift to the at-risk child, shelters are state mandated to

report to CAS when women with children seek safety at the shelter.

During recruitment for Pat's interviews, an Indigenous woman wished to tell me her story as a mother with three young children seeking a violence-free life. This mother wanted it known how quickly things can spiral out of control for her and her children when state systems are involved. As a mother in her late twenties, she identified a lifetime of oppression growing up as a CAS Crown ward. She claimed her troubled childhood within the child welfare system was a major factor that led to her becoming involved in an abusive relationship. As a mother fleeing violence, she was further oppressed by the very state systems that failed her as a child. Accessing police help to escape an abuser no longer seemed a viable option for this mother because police reports only contributed to building a case against her with CAS. So she suffered through further violence without speaking up. Returning to the abuser and being under his control, and in his home, seemed a safer option than remaining separated and enduring further surprise attacks by the abuser. Her situation with CAS became increasingly difficult as the mother's decision to stay with the abuser was negatively viewed as choosing the abuser over her children. Additional attempts to separate from the abuser became more difficult for this mother who encountered a judgmental approach from staff at the shelters. Questions such as "what is going to be different this time?" and "how serious is she about the changes?" blames mothers for staying and returning to abusers, rather than holding the state responsible for the systemic barriers women encounter in leaving abusers. After losing custody of her children to child welfare, she became a single (mother) in state systems that bounced her from domestic violence shelters to homeless shelters with a limited stay period in each. Subsisting on Ontario Works, she could only afford a room for rent, a housing situation that further limited the possibility of her regaining custody of her children.

A single woman's "mother" status is further eroded by systemic barriers that prevent mothers from creating a stable environment to have their children returned to their care. For example, CAS agencies increasingly require marginalized mothers to provide a quality of care that often exceeds the financial capabilities of low-income families (Swift and Parada). A low-income mother, who no longer has her children in her care, will have her social service allotment on Ontario Works cut back to that of a single woman, often deepening her poverty. Additionally, when making applications for social housing, the mother's housing need is based on the number of individuals in her current household. If her children are in temporary CAS care, her choice of housing is often limited to housing for a single person, such as a room rental, not suitable for visits with her children or the return of the children into her care.

Although survivor mothers want to do what is best for their children, they often feel overwhelmed and burdened by CAS' mandatory requirement to attend

numerous parenting programs or are unfairly excluded from them. Parenting programs are important to mothers who have left abusive relationships, as they can help mothers learn new ways to minimize the effect of abuse on the children and to regain and strengthen the parenting role and the mother-child bond undermined in an abusive relationship. However, these state-mandated responsibilities often burden mothers during a time of crisis when they are just trying to survive day-to-day and support their children through this difficult and disruptive period of transitioning to violence-free lives. In cases where the state has apprehended children from the mothers, these single (mothers) are often not entitled to attend mother-child groups offered by the shelter, thereby decreasing the likelihood of their children being returned. These mothers are treated as though they are single women. Their losses are not acknowledged, their needs are not recognized, and their ability to improve on their mothering potentials is curtailed by the systems involved in the apprehension of their children. Parenting programs should be voluntary for all parents and single mothers, with and without children in their care.

Survivor Inclusion

The inclusion of survivor stories is important for systemic change. However, there is a general sense of hopelessness for mother survivors that speaking out against systemic oppressions will bring positive change for mothers and their children. Although single mothers are often the most outspoken and knowledgeable about the changes needed to address the systemic failures, they encounter a number of barriers when engaging in survivor inclusion initiatives. Despite assurances of confidentiality, mothers involved with systems, such as CAS, police, and women's shelters, fear reprisal and judgment when they provide constructive feedback about the systemic barriers they encountered when fleeing violence. For example, one mother survivor who spoke out against CAS was seen as "not focussing on her priorities" of getting her children back, which affected her chances of regaining custody. Highlighting the fear women experience in speaking out against CAS, another women who participated in the research mentioned "Speaking up can come at a cost; we need others to help us speak up, thanks for doing this."

Over the last four decades, there has been a gradual decline of survivors doing work in the antiviolence movement. This loss of survivor participation is in part due to the VAW sector becoming more professionalized. The sector has lost its grassroots approach and has started to emphasize a business model in an effort to increase its legitimacy and obtain better state funding. To address the loss of survivor voices, the Ontario Association of Interval and Transition Houses (OAITH) supported the formation of a Survivor Advisory Committee

in 2012. Since its inception, I have sat as the co-chair and chair on this committee to support the growth of the survivor advocacy group, despite the lack of state funding to support these initiatives, a concern also raised by Paula. In early 2016, survivor group members participated as moderators for an online VAW foundations training for frontline workers offered through OAITH. The survivor-centred training provided opportunities for survivors to create discussion points with frontline staff in shelters, new workers to the VAW sector, and university students pursuing future careers working with victims of violence about the systemic barriers survivors faced in living violence-free lives.

Changes can occur when survivors are included in government decision making. At a recent Building a Bigger Wave Conference, a number of survivors, who sit on their local domestic violence coordinating committees, discussed their initiatives in process and demonstrated how survivor mothers have found a way to work against and within state systems for change. For example, one group of survivor mothers in Ontario identified problems when seeking help about child-support payments from the local family responsibility office (FRO). The survivor group developed an online resource in plain language as an informational guide to help Ontario child-support recipients advocate for their families and better navigate the complex FRO system responsible for child-support collection and enforcement. This guide caught the eye of the Ministry of Community and Social Services and was acknowledged as a valuable resource. Currently, the survivor's group is conducting a follow-up survey where the results will be included in a report to the FRO with recommended changes and improvements to address the barriers women survivors encounter when taking action on their missing child-support payments.

From the Margins to the Centre: Alternative Visions to Address Systemic Colonialism, Racism, and Sexism

U.S.-based alternative intervention and accountability models offer new hope and visions for addressing systemic oppressions in state systems responsible for supporting and protecting mothers and their families fleeing violence. Two alternative visions are considered here: nonstate accountability models and hybrid accountability models.

Nonstate Accountability Models

In the U.S., community groups are developing radical, nonstate community accountability models in conjunction with local organizing efforts as an alternative to oppressive mainstream system responses to VAW (Smith). One example is Creative Interventions in the San Francisco Bay area, a collaborative project with Asian immigrant domestic violence advocacy organizations within

immigrant, queer, and racialized communities. Eschewing the involvement of any state systems in solutions to violence against women, this community-based intervention model instead engages circles of friends, family, and community to build collective responses, map allies, and use resources available and familiar to those affected by violence to construct remedies to end violence (Pennell and Kim 178). The community-based model is particularly relevant in immigrant communities where they are more distrustful of criminal legal systems and are oriented toward problem solving that engages their community networks. They are interested in solutions that hold the possibility of keeping families and community intact (Kim 207).

Hybrid Models of Accountability

Hybrid models of state and nonstate interventions to violence against women offer a range of options to better address women's demands and rights to live violence-free lives within mainstream state systems. A U.S. community-based vision of widening the circle of informal and formal supports involves elevating the leadership of the family and its community while still leveraging legal resources to safeguard women and their children in the home (Pennell and Kim 178). For example, at family-centred forums survivors and perpetrators along with their family members and informal networks of friends and other supportive service agencies are integral to decision making, but they do not relinquish state resources and protections, such as policing and the criminal justice system (Pennell and Kim 183). Family-centred forums are potentially transformative for racialized and immigrant communities and women as they can build a context of cultural safety in which family groups can speak in their own language and access traditional, religious, or spiritual interventions and practices (Pennell & Kim 184).

Ontario Survivors Speaking Out: Activism in Communities and at Policy Tables

U.S. alternative models addressing violence against women are still evolving. More research is needed to fully understand how effective alternative accountability models are in addressing systemic oppressions, holding abusers accountable, and advancing gender, race, and class equalities for women with children seeking violence-free lives. However, the models are helpful in envisioning new ways forward for survivors to drive change outside and inside the state.

In this article, we argue that survivor activism and involvement both within and outside the state is imperative to drive systemic change in Ontario. As Paula's and Eva's narratives reveal, the experiences of Ontario survivor-activists as mothers,

racialized and Indigenous survivors of violence, social workers, community leaders, antiviolence activists, homemakers, researchers, and feminists provide unique opportunities for organizing within and outside the state. Outside the state, women's community-based activism offers informal supports connecting survivors with other mothers fleeing violence and raises community awareness locally and province-wide about racialized and colonialist barriers encountered by abused women with children fleeing violence. The increased involvement of survivors inside the state at staff retraining sessions and at some local and provincial policy tables signals growing support for survivor inclusion at the systemic level. However, more action is urgently needed to move the voices and experiences of survivors from the margins to the centre of policy agendas and decision making. State-funded support is crucial for the full inclusion of survivor-activists at local and provincial policy tables. Voices from northern Ontario must be included at policy tables, as the specific funding and service needs of northern communities, and particularly Indigenous communities, are often ignored or eclipsed by larger southern communities. Furthermore, the state must support the efforts of survivor-activists to confront and disrupt the barriers thwarting survivor inclusion in state-funded systems in light of the troubling absence of policing, criminal justice, and child welfare organizations at survivor-centred initiatives.

As one survivor-activist emphasized:

Our society must begin to listen to survivors, hear their collective voices, and understand the barriers women face in the systems that are meant to help. Until survivors are welcomed at the tables where policy change occurs, the changes that are needed to help women fleeing violence will not happen. Women who have been there know what the problems are; these women who have survived our justice system can tell you that a piece of paper does not bring protection. These women can tell you that leaving an abusive partner plummets you into a poverty so stark you think you will never find your way out. These women can show you how a little spark of hope can lead to immense change within women, community and country. These women have survived, they have overcome, they are warriors, and they deserve to have their voices heard by the patriarchal systems that have oppressed them. Invite these women to your table and hear their stories. They can tell you more than the statistics ever can.

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