14 Domestic violence and feminism

Sarah Wendt

Introduction

Feminism was at the cornerstone of making domestic violence visible as a social problem, advocating for shelters/refuges, emotional support for women and children victims, and social change including legal responses to the perpetration of intimate partner abuse (Nichols, 2013). Furthermore, feminism has centralised gender in analyses of domestic violence. In this chapter I outline the debates about gender to explain why men are predominantly perpetrators of domestic violence and women and children victims. I explore how feminism has been instrumental in exposing domestic violence as part of a range of tactics (including physical, sexual, psychological, financial, social and spiritual abuse) used to exercise power and control over women and children. I conclude by arguing that feminism and social work can together lead practice and policy responses to domestic violence so gender continues to remain central.

Throughout the chapter I use the term feminism to speak broadly of a movement across multiple disciplines and professional practices. I acknowledge that feminism is not a single theory or concept; however, I argue it generally advocates for the attainment of rights for women. I also use feminism to reflect a diverse range of scholarship that explores, explains and debates gender (Johnson, 2010). Feminism enables me as a researcher and social worker to look at gender in a critical way. Feminism provides me with a framework to look at social structures, institutions and discourses that impact on and influence women and men. I refer to gender as a social construct, that is, we learn femininity and masculinity through social interactions, but these are bound up with power relations between women and men (Bradley, 2013; Wendt & Zannettino, 2015). Through the contributions of feminism, I will argue domestic violence is an act of gender-based violence, mostly perpetrated by men against women in the context of an intimate relationship, to maintain control over women, a control to which men feel they are entitled (Johnson & Ferraro, 2000).

Understanding the gender debate

There is a long and controversial debate surrounding domestic violence which revolves around the question of whether men's and women's involvement in intimate partner violence is symmetrical or asymmetrical (Johnson, 2006; Krahe, Bieneck & Moller, 2005). The debate generally has two sides. One side argues domestic violence is largely a problem of men assaulting and abusing female intimate partners, while the other side argues that women are at least as violent as men in intimate relationships (Johnson, 2006). These debates will continue because of conceptual and methodological differences in the studies that aim to measure prevalence and incidences of domestic violence (Krahe et al., 2005). However, despite this ongoing debate, I argue that it is feminist analysis that is most compelling and empirically sound for a variety of reasons.

First, feminism has advanced the recognition that domestic violence is a significant social problem. During the second wave feminist movement, activists in Australia, the UK and the US raised awareness of the extent of domestic violence, campaigned and lobbied for social change, and provided practical support through establishing networks of women's shelters/refuges (Buchanan, 2013). Feminist researchers and practitioners have therefore provided the strongest critique of traditional approaches to studying domestic violence. For example, the Conflict Tactics Scale developed by Straus (1979) is a widely used measurement of intimate partner violence. It asks women and men to indicate whether they had ever experienced particular acts of violence (slapped, punched, kicked, forced to have sex). Feminists have exposed that a method that asks about particular acts of violence ignores the essence of abusive relationships. Fear, control and the atmosphere of terror that permeates domestic violence is not captured, as well as the many forms of psychological, social and financial abuse (Laing & Humphreys, 2013). Furthermore, feminists have argued these types of methods in research on domestic violence cannot assess the dynamics of the relationship or the impact and severity of the violence (Boonzaier & Schalkwyk, 2011; Laing & Humphreys, 2013). Feminism has therefore been influential in creating and developing other research instruments to measure the complex dimensions, severity and meaning of domestic violence that have been missing from earlier surveys (Taft, Hegarty & Flood, 2001; Laing & Humphreys, 2013). The Composite Abuse Scale (CAS) is one example, developed by Professor Kelsey Hegarty. This scale is the first validated multidimensional measure of intimate partner violence and has been used extensively globally and is available in ten languages. This measure of partner violence has four dimensions including severe combined abuse, emotional abuse, physical abuse and harassment (Hegarty, Bush & Sheehan, 2005). Feminist researchers are not opposed to large-scale surveys. Feminists understand the importance of revealing the prevalence of domestic violence, but they also argue for

the importance of not missing the more nuanced accounts of women's experiences of violence and abuse from an intimate partner. Feminism has highlighted the importance of accounting for individual, interpersonal and sociocultural contexts within which domestic violence occurs (Boonzaier & Schalkwyk, 2011; Wendt & Zannettino, 2015).

Second, feminist scholarship of domestic violence moves beyond 'simply and crudely counting blows' (Krahe et al., 2005, p. 821). Feminist researchers also use qualitative approaches to study domestic violence, which has allowed women to represent their experiences of violence according to their own frames of meaning. Qualitative methods have enabled complexities of intimate partner violence to be explored and for gender to be theorised. In-depth information about the distinctive experiences of abuse in relatively understudied groups of women have therefore emerged (Boonzaier & Schalkwyk, 2011; Wendt & Zannettino, 2015). By engaging in a range of methodologies feminism has provided a concentration of work that explores and examines broader structural and cultural factors that allow so many women to be victimised by their male intimate partners. For example, as DeKeseredy (2011) argues, when sociocultural and structural factors within the institutions of marriage and family as well as law, religion and media are examined, the question of why domestic violence and why gender matters becomes evident. Feminist researchers, scholars and theorists in the past and present have exposed how power and violence are highly gendered and linked to culturally constructed and idealised forms of masculinity and femininity (Hester, 2012; Wendt & Zannettino, 2015); hence feminism has made it possible for domestic violence to be examined within contexts of gender inequality (Hanmer & Itzin, 2000).

Third, feminism has exposed coercive control to highlight the extent, severity and impact of intimate partner violence on women, which has been essential in forming solutions for domestic violence. Stark (2007) explains the gendered nature of coercive control by arguing that men's power (physical, material and social resources) forces women to survive domestic violence by calculating, evaluating and reassessing their own behaviour, including resistance or self-defence. Women become entrapped in domestic violence relationships because of the effect of control on women's health and wellbeing (Stark, 2007). Similarly, Johnson (2006) uses the term intimate terrorism to expose coercive control and to highlight the exertion of power, fear and control as being predominantly perpetrated by men against women. Through his research, he argues men's violence produces more physical injuries, more negative psychological consequences and more fear (Johnson, 2010).

Feminism has not ignored women's use of violence and abuse in intimate partner relationships. Hester (2012) outlined key studies which have found that women are rarely the initiators of violence and those who are violent to their male partners are more likely to be using 'violent

resistance' for self-defence and retaliation against violent male partners. Studies have also shown that those with a long history of victimisation from previous male partners and in childhood use violence to decrease their own chance of further victimisation. In summary, feminist scholarship, research and practice has contributed much to understanding the complexities of domestic violence and gender differences. From decades of feminist-informed research, theorising and advocacy, the evidence is strong that domestic violence involves more death, injury, fear and psychological damage when perpetrated by men rather than women (Johnson, 2010).

Feminism has successfully led and presented compelling empirical evidence that domestic violence is largely perpetrated by men (Johnson, 2006). While the debates about the extent and nature of domestic violence will continue and the question of gender will remain, I argue that feminism is vital in this space for two reasons. First, feminism keeps gender central in explanations and understandings of domestic violence. Second, feminism exposes and challenges the dominance of masculinities and heteronormative power within these debates. Feminism stresses that gender is relational and ever-present; hence these debates about domestic violence happen within a context of challenging gender power relations.

Understanding the gendered nature of domestic violence

Domestic violence did not even exist as a concept or phenomenon before feminist activism, research and scholarship (Wendt & Zannettino, 2015). It was feminism that exposed and named domestic violence and documented the gendered nature of such abuse. Feminist-informed definitions of domestic violence have included coercive control and a range of abusive behaviours such as physical, sexual, psychological, social, economic and spiritual abuse (Laing & Humphreys, 2013; DeKeseredy, 2011). To demonstrate the importance and value of this work, I cite examples from research, mainly my own, to show the range of abusive behaviour that is perpetrated against women. These examples show how men engage with constructions of gender in domestic violence in sophisticated ways to create fear for women (Yodanis, 2004). The examples also show that women are rarely only victimised by one type of assault.

Feminist researchers and practitioners have long argued that physical abuse includes not only any act of physical violence but the threat of it. The threat of male violence is enough to create fear and control. For example, Boonzaier and Schalkwyk (2011) explored women's narratives of domestic violence in South Africa. They quote a woman talking about physical abuse:

> I'm like this, I can't keep quiet. I must talk back. And he does not want that! If I talk back or say something back, then it seems like he

> can give me one hell of smack. I decided, one day I decided, it is better if I keep my mouth shut. Because if I stay quiet it seems like he will also be quiet.
>
> (p. 275)

This quotation shows many practices of gender such as women being blamed for provoking abuse and the many ways women try to understand and please their partner to stop abuse. Similar to physical abuse, feminists have also argued that sexual abuse is not only unwanted physical invasion or penetration of a woman's body that is sexual in nature, but includes a range of insidious coercive practices that control women. Sexual abuse is also humiliation, degradation and violation of women's sexual integrity (Hlavka, 2014; Kelly, 1990). For example, a woman I interviewed about her experiences of domestic violence wanted to talk about rape and asked me many times if rape can occur in marriage. She shared examples of feeling uncomfortable and compelled to have sex with her husband.

> I thought 'I have to be the submissive wife, I must give in even if I don't want it and even if my period's not quite finished yet, even if you're not comfortable with it'.... Anyway so I just put up with it. I've gotten to the point that my skin crawls if my husband touches me.
>
> (Wendt & Zannettino, 2015, p. 100)

Feminism has exposed and critiqued the heteronormative discourses that consistently link female sexuality with passivity, vulnerability and submissiveness, and male sexuality with dominance, aggression and desire (Hlavka, 2014). Liz Kelly has long argued that sexual violence needs to be understood to occur along a continuum of coercive behaviours, gender inequality and sexism (Kelly, 1990).Within the context of domestic violence, many women experience difficulties in naming sexual abuse because it incorporates shame and humiliation for women, fear of retaliation from a partner and ideas of male entitlement to sex (Boonzaier & Schalkwyk, 2011; Hlavka, 2014).

Sexual and physical abuse are also emotional abuse. No one strand of abuse can be isolated and viewed on its own as each receives support from the others (DeKeseredy, 2011). Emotional abuse can sometimes be referred to as psychological abuse or verbal abuse and it is diverse; however, feminists have documented many stories from women including engendering fear or humiliation, enforcement of social isolation (social abuse) and taking or withholding finances (financial abuse) as examples of emotional abuse. Emotional abuse generates anxiety, and impoverishes and undermines self-esteem (Jewkes, 2010). Feminist scholarship has pointed out that these strands of emotional abuse together with sociocultural constructions of gender explain coercion, control and fear in domestic violence (DeKeseredy, 2011). The quotations below from my

own research demonstrate gender power relations along the continuum of emotional abuse.

> At the dinner table he would treat me like a child. I never used to eat many vegetables and he was, well, how can you expect the kids to eat vegetables, and just look at me, like you better eat those vegetables. And the kids never said a word and as soon as dinner was finished they would get up and one had to do the dishes, even my daughter who was 4 years old. And I when I think about it, why didn't I stop it? It was because I was too scared, scared of the wrath, the ranting and the raving and glaring … that could go on all night and escalate with his drinking.
>
> (Wendt, Buchanan & Moulding, 2015, p. 8)

Financial abuse is tied up with emotional abuse. It includes a perpetrator controlling or withholding finances, spending finances for his use only causing inadequate finance for essential living costs, as well as perpetrators sabotaging victims' access to employment and income (Chung & Wendt, 2015).

> I feel like a hopeless mother because I couldn't protect them [her children], because I was living in such absolute terror all the time and desperation all the time. We never had enough to eat, we weren't well, we were unhealthy.
>
> (Wendt & Zannettino, 2015, p. 53)

> I'm sure the power imbalance that it caused [she is talking about her employment] contributed to his actions or his attitudes. He was quite happy for me to work and to spend my money but he didn't like me to talk about my work at all … he didn't want to hear about anything that I did, he made it quite clear.[1]

These two quotations show gendered expectations that women can and should navigate and meet both partners' and children's needs all the time, even in dangerous contexts. Perpetrators of abuse can draw on such discourses to make women feel guilt, doubt and blame in domestic violence.

Social abuse is often referred to as controlling the victim through forms of surveillance and monitoring, for example, of where she goes, who she sees and what she wears. It also includes perpetrators isolating victims from family and friends by convincing them they do not need anyone else or sabotaging contact with them (Chung & Wendt, 2015). 'He always wanted me to dress a particular way, like wearing trousers and pants was just wrong, short hair was sinful' (Wendt & Zannettino, 2015, p. 95).

> I was doing a course and having a lot of fun and actually making friends for the first time and he was getting jealous of that and kept

> on threatening and getting aggressive and threatening that he was going to kill himself if I didn't stay with him and trying to disconnect me from all the friends there. Later on, I think throughout the relationship, every time that I made friends he kept on putting those friends against me or putting them down in front of me and making sure that I never had any connection with them. It got to the stage where you couldn't have anyone even around the house.[2]

These two quotations show a sense of male entitlement and expectations of women serving and meeting the needs of men. Women are positioned as the property of men.

There is also emerging literature that has focused on religion and domestic violence and hence spiritual abuse has also been named. Spiritual abuse is evident when the perpetrator uses the realm of a woman's spiritual experiences and connectedness to hurt her as well as the misuse of religious beliefs or practices to justify physical and other forms of abuse (Wendt & Zannettino, 2015, p. 87). For example, I interviewed a Christian woman about her experiences of domestic violence and she showed me her Bible numerous times, referring to biblical texts that her partner used to force her to stay with him.

> He defiled my Bible. In Genesis, Chapter 2 and Verse 16 when after Adam and Eve had eaten the forbidden fruit, God said, 'Your desire will be for your husband and he will rule over you…'. He underlined and with exclamation marks 'he will rule over you'. My husband circled 'your desire will be for your husband and he will rule over you'.
>
> (Wendt & Zannettino, 2015, p. 90)

In this example, masculine authority and feminine submission is constructed as divinely ordained and this reinforcement of gender can diminish women's beliefs in their right to, or their sense of, equality (Allen & Devitt, 2012).

The qualitative responses above show that men use countless and complex highly gendered abuse tactics to establish coercive control in domestic violence. Domestic violence cannot be understood as a list of isolated incidences, or violent acts. Domestic violence encompasses patterns of coercive control that result from everyday unequal gender power relations. Men who use violence in intimate relationships draw on discourses of gender systematically to degrade and belittle women, eroding self-worth and consequently creating entrapment. Gender positioning and how power is played out in the contexts of intimate relationships is central to understanding domestic violence, its continuation and justification across time (Wendt & Zannettino, 2015). In short, feminism has exposed the gendered nature of domestic violence, which reflects patterns of male domination in most societies (Taft et al., 2001).

What happens when gender disappears: what does this mean for social work?

By centralising gender, feminism has shaped policy and practice responses to domestic violence. Domestic violence responses are largely and appropriately targeted to women victims and their children (Taft et al., 2001). Intervention therefore focuses on enhancing women's safety, providing psychological and emotional support, and increasing access to resources such as housing, income and child care. Gender analysis in policy and practice is most obvious in the work of women's shelters/refuges. Women's shelters/refuges provide protection and serve as a hiding place for women and their children when leaving domestic violence. They provide a range of services including information and understanding about domestic violence and offer a supportive social atmosphere in which women can think about and plan for their future (Jonker et al., 2014). Women's shelters/refuges also help women understand and overcome the fear and anxiety that are a consequence of coercive control, violence and abuse. Through close contact with other women who have endured domestic violence women begin to see the patterns of abuse that denote domestic violence as a societal issue not of their making and thus they can let go of shame and self-blame. In addition shelters/refuges provide advocacy services, legal counselling and referrals to other services. Principles of empowerment underpin the work of shelters/refuges in order to enable women to regain confidence and skills to function on their own (Haj-Yahia & Cohen, 2009; Jonker et al., 2014). In summary, feminist-informed responses to domestic violence aim to raise women's collective consciousness and social awareness that domestic violence is not related to women's personal failure in marriage or intimate partners' idiosyncratic behaviours or pathology, but are the result of broader social gender inequality (Mason, 2007).

Feminism is essential in domestic violence research, and policy and practice responses, because advances in the domestic violence field are continually met with counterattack or undermining of the gains made (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2013). De-gendering of domestic violence happens in multiple ways with perhaps the most aggressive coming from organised anti-feminist groups in western capitalist countries (Flood, 2004). It also happens in more subtle ways by social and legal policy adopting gender-neutral language when naming domestic violence. Furthermore, de-gendering domestic violence work can also be the result of funding pressures, competitive tendering processes and domestic violence work being absorbed or morphed into generic services such as homelessness and family counselling. These pressures are always present and can be seen across the western world. For example, in both Australia and the UK in the previous 12 months specialised domestic violence services that respond to women and children have been defunded, closed

or at minimum received funding on yearly contracts (see Bullen, 2015; Laville, 2014; Neate, 2014). I argue social work is well positioned to engage with and utilise feminist scholarship so gender remains central in domestic violence analysis, policy and practice. Social work is a profession that strives to raise awareness of structural and systemic inequities, which fits with the broader goals of feminism to explore and expose oppression and disadvantage in the lives of diverse groups of women. Feminism enables social workers to see how women and men are affected by broader societal structures and discourses (Teater, 2010). As Dominelli (2002) argues, feminist theories provide a platform for anti-oppressive practice, a critical component for social workers to work against marginalisation and disadvantage. Without gender analysis, I argue, domestic violence becomes an issue of individual pathology that is reflective of women's so-called poor choices and victimisation and something only men with particular psychological problems perpetrate. Domestic violence is therefore positioned as a problem for particular individuals, which diminishes the broad-scale harmful effects on women and children. De-gendering thereby eliminates collective action and hence ignores the importance of social change that is required to stop domestic violence (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2013).

Conclusion

For social work, continuous reflections are required to ensure that policy and practice responses to domestic violence do not separate the experiences of individual women from their social contexts (Laing & Humphreys, 2013). It is through the recognition of social contexts that feminism has exposed the gendered nature of domestic violence. Without its gendered social context, the social and historical causes of male violence disappear. A contextual and political understanding is fundamental to action and needed to reduce or eliminate domestic violence. Feminism enables social work not to forget the social context of gender power relations and hence be part of the solution to end domestic violence.

Notes

1 This interview was conducted as part of an Australian Research Council Grant titled Project ID: DP130104437, Gendered violence and citizenship: the complex effects of intimate partner violence on mental health, housing and employment.
2 The interview was conducted as part of the study reported in Wendt, Buchanan and Moulding (2015).

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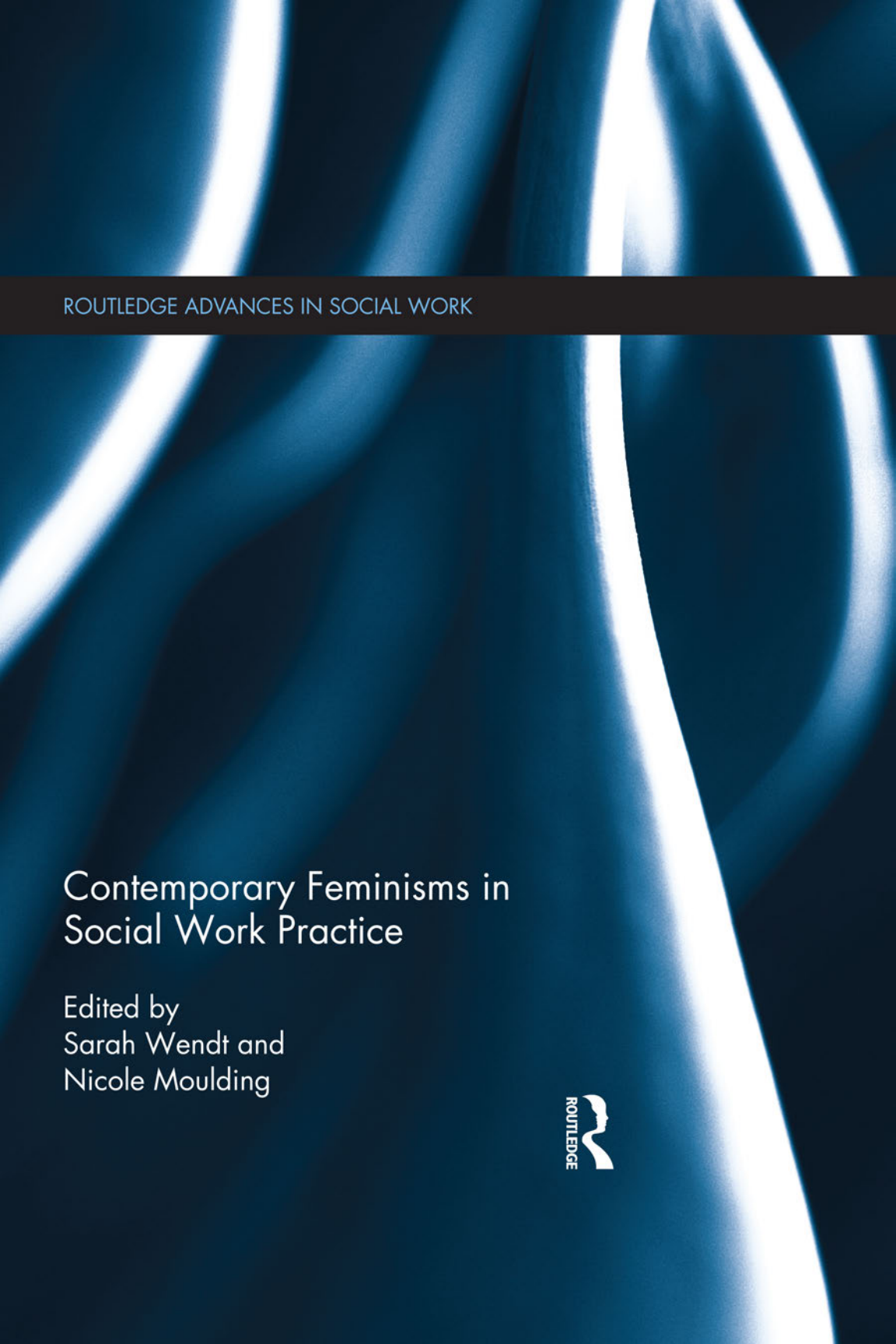
ROUTLEDGE ADVANCES IN SOCIAL WORK
Contemporary Feminisms in Social Work Practice
Edited by
Sarah Wendt and
Nicole Moulding
ROUTLEDGE

Contemporary Feminisms in Social Work Practice

Contemporary Feminisms in Social Work Practice explores feminism as core to social work knowledge, practice and ethics. It demonstrates how gender-neutral perspectives and practices obscure gender discourses and power relations. It also shows feminist social work practice can transform areas of social work not specifically concerned with gender, through its emphasis on relationships and power.

Within and outside feminism, there is a growing assumption that equality has been won and is readily available to all women. However, women continue to dominate the ranks of the poor in developed and developing countries around the world; male perpetrated violence against women and children has not reduced; women outnumber men by up to three to one in the diagnosis of common mental health problems; and women continue to be severely underrepresented in every realm of power, decision making and wealth. This worrying context draws attention to the ways gender relations structure most of the problems faced by the women, men and children in the day-to-day worlds in which social work operates. Drawing together key contemporary thinking about feminism and its place in social work, this international collection looks both at core curriculum areas taught in social work programmes and at a wide range of practice fields that involve key challenges and opportunities for future feminist social work.

This book is suitable for all social work students and academics. It examines the nuanced nature of power relationships in the everyday and areas such as working with cross-cultural communities, mental health, interpersonal violence and abuse, homelessness, child protection, ageing, disability and sexuality.

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