The Invisibility of Men's Practices: Problem representations in British and Finnish Social Policy on Men's Violences Against Women

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ABSTRACT: This paper investigates British and Finnish government policy discourses around men's violence against women. Finland and the UK were selected for comparison because of the historically contrasting relationships between the women's movements and the state in the two countries. Two government policy documents from each country, published between 2008 and 2011, have been analysed using Carol Bacchi's 'What's the problem represented to be?' approach. The main finding of this analysis is that despite men being the perpetrators of the vast majority of different forms of violence towards women, in all four texts men's practices are almost entirely invisible. This concealment is carried out through six core problematisations of men's violence against women: as a problem of women; as a problem without perpetrators; as a problem without context; as a 'gender-neutral' problem; as an 'agentless' problem; and as a problem of the Other(s). With the policy focus restricted to victim-survivors, responsibility is placed on women for both causing and stopping men's violence. The commonalities among the four texts suggest that there may be some convergence in contemporary problematisations of men's violence against women by British and Finnish policymakers, where its systemic and gendered nature are recognised at a superficial level only.

Men's violences against women are both systemic and gendered practices. They are systemic in that rather than being perpetrated by a few pathological individual men, they are normalised and commonplace behaviours that form a continuum of violence and abuse, which are routine and everyday experiences for women across society (Kelly 1988). In this way, 'normal' and 'abnormal' practices based around the exertion of power and control by men over women blur into one another (Bacchi 1999; Kelly 1988). They are gendered phenomena not just in how they are directed at women, but in how they are perpetrated overwhelmingly by men, and are rooted in the gender order of men's dominance and women's subordination. Phenomena such as domestic violence and sexual violence can be perpetrated by anyone, against anyone, but they are committed by men against women in uniquely systemic and structured ways. They both reproduce and are a product of patriarchal power relations (Westmarland 2015).

However, as socially systemic crimes there is also nothing inevitable about men's violences against women. Recognition of this fact enables us to envisage a world in which, through social change, these phenomena could be stopped. The gendered social context which underlies men's violences against women therefore provides clues as to how this kind of change might be achieved. For Walby (1990), men's violence against women is one of several social structures that constitute the patriarchal gender system, along with patriarchal relations in paid employment, in the state, in sexuality, and in cultural institutions, as well as the patriarchal mode of production. It is fundamentally connected to the social construction of masculinity (Gadd 2012), and the kinds of practices, ideas, expectations and entitlements that we teach to men and boys as being normal and legitimate, and deem to be acceptable and desirable. This applies to all forms of men's violence, including violence towards other men and violence towards oneself, which combine with violence against women to form the triad of men's violence (Kaufman 1987). All three corners of this triad function to maintain the hegemony of men (Hearn 2004, 2012).

Walby (1990) describes how the different structures of patriarchy are mutually reinforcing. This can be observed in the response of the state to men's violences against women, where the prevalence of inaction and failure has conveyed that the state tolerates and condones these practices in different countries. It is therefore vital to examine the contemporary approach of the state to men's violences

against women, and consider how it ignores, legitimises, or challenges these phenomena. That is the aim for this paper, which is based on an analysis of the discourses of recent policy documents produced by the governments of Finland and the United Kingdom, using Carol Bacchi's 'what's the problem represented to be?' approach. The primary finding is that in the social policies of both countries, there is a failure to address the systemic and gendered nature of men's violences against women, as a result of the invisibility of men's practices in the ways in which these phenomena are problematised.

Gendered violence in social policy

Gender can be understood as a systemic social organising principle which categorises people into the hierarchy of 'women' and 'men'. Social policy is constantly shaping and being shaped by gendered power relations despite often being conceived as a 'gender-neutral' process (Hearn and Pringle 2006). For example, assumptions about gender are built into the development of policies, yet often these assumptions are not recognised or explicitly expressed (Hearn and McKie 2008). Even when policy does make gender explicit, the focus is usually centred on what Hearn and McKie (2008) call the 'policy users' rather than the 'problem creators'. This is part of the wider association of gender solely with women, which feminists have long critiqued. Meanwhile, men are rarely named as men or specifically focused upon in policy, including in relation to the violences they commit (Hearn and McKie 2008; Hearn and Pringle 2006). For instance, Hearn and McKie (2010) note that when men who use violence are discussed in policymaking, they are typically individualised and constructed as 'atypical', whilst the agentic focus is placed almost entirely on women, as if they are responsible for both causing, and stopping, men's violence.

Women's movements across the world have had a considerable impact in forcing policymakers to recognise men's violence against women as a problem. These movements have taken different forms and adopted different approaches in different countries. This paper is comparing the policies of Finland and the UK, primarily because of the notable contrasts in the histories of the women's movements and their relationship to the state in the two countries. In the UK, feminists successfully initiated some of the first autonomous women's refuges and Rape

Crisis centres in the world, and these have played vital roles in supporting victim-survivors of men's violence, as well as having an impact on wider policy, practice, and perceptions (Harne and Radford 2008; Hester 2005). In Finland meanwhile, the women's movement is more associated with the crucial role it has played in the development of the so-called 'woman-friendly', universalist, social democratic Finnish welfare state (Esping-Andersen 1990; Hearn 2001; Siaroff 1994).

Refuges for victim-survivors of domestic violence in Finland developed out of former child welfare institutions, and have often featured more of an emphasis on mediation, as well as a closer connection with the state and an orientation towards social services and child protection (Clarke 2011; Hautanen 2005; Hearn and McKie 2010; McKie and Hearn 2004). This is indicative of how the women's movement in Finland has historically not focused to the same extent on men's violence against women as has been the case in the UK (Eriksson and Pringle 2005; Hester 2005; Kantola 2006). In addition, Hearn and McKie (2010) note that whilst there has been a strong emphasis in the Nordic countries on human rights, this has been based on the notion of the 'genderless citizen', which has frequently led to an overtly 'gender-neutral' approach to social policy. Whilst there has been a move towards gendered conceptions of men's violences against women in Finland in recent years (Keskinen 2005), Hautanen (2005) argues that a fear of being perceived to be making accusations or generalisations about 'all men' has remained, which means that this discussion is often carried out in vague terms.

Kantola (2006) argues that key to understanding some of these differences between Finland and the UK is how the women's movement has theorised and engaged with the state in fundamentally different ways in the two countries. In Finland, many feminists have traditionally regarded the state as a relatively benign apparatus for social change (Hearn 2001; Kantola 2006). In the UK meanwhile, the women's movement has more often viewed the state as a patriarchal institution and a core component in the maintenance of women's subordination (Walby 1990). Kantola contends that feminists in Britain has thus often been more wary about operating 'inside' of the state than the women's movement in Finland, and these differences have been reflected in the ways in which they have sought to resist men's violence – and in the state's response to it.

However, with social policy within European countries such as Finland and the UK showing signs of convergence through factors such as the globalisation

of neoliberal capitalism and the growing influence of supranational institutions on some areas of policymaking, it is possible that national distinctions in policy approaches to men's violences against women are becoming more blurred. For example, the approach of 'gender mainstreaming' has been emphasised by the European Union since the 1990's and has become common practice for many European governments (Hearn and McKie 2008; Hester 2005). Hearn and McKie (2010) describe how the focus of this approach to tackling gender inequalities has been on equality of opportunity, or 'means' equality, which is based on treating women and men equally, rather than on equality of outcomes, or 'results' equality, where means are applied differently in order to achieve equal outcomes. They argue that this is one example of how policies are to some extent converging in their 'degenderedness', where the gendered nature of the phenomenon is taken for granted but not explicitly examined, and an 'averted gaze' to gender is adopted in the state's response, where it is discussed without ever really being addressed (Hearn and McKie 2010).

Problematisions of men's violences against women

The ways in which men's violences against women are constructed and talked about in discourses – understood as the meaning systems we create in the ways that we use language (Bacchi 2009, Gill 2000, Wodak 2008) – fundamentally shape how these phenomena are comprehended. This is one reason why language has long been a site of interest and contestation for feminists, who have demonstrated how discourse is deeply involved in the maintenance of men's dominance (Gill 1995). Day-to-day, taken-for-granted discursive practices do not just reflect inequalities, but help to produce and reinforce them. The ways in which policies are discursively constructed therefore has significant consequences both in their direct material effects, and how they impact upon public perceptions of different phenomena. Policies are normative in the sense that they shape, and are shaped by, common meanings, assumptions, ideas and values (Murray and Powell 2009).

Bacchi (1999, 2009) argues that making explicit the 'problems' which are implicit in policies, and carefully scrutinising them, is a vital aspect of policy analysis. She contends that 'problems' do not simply exist in the world; people decide what is and what is not defined as one, and they are constituted and given shape by

policies. Governments do not simply react to 'problems', instead they actively create them as an obligatory part of policymaking. Policies are based around making proposals for change, and therefore implicitly represent 'problems', things which need to be changed, by their very nature (Bacchi 2009). People can thus be understood as being governed through problematisations rather than through policies themselves, because policies are problematising activities. Bacchi (2009) therefore argues that when analysing policies we should shift our attention from taken-for-granted 'problems', to how these 'problems' are constructed in the first place, and to examining the shape and character of 'problem representations'. Rather than simply considering whether a certain policy is a success or failure, this means assessing the premises behind particular problem representations, and the assumptions and presuppositions that underpin and shape policies. This project sought to question what limits are imposed by the representations of men's violences against women within Finnish and British policy discourses, which aspects of these phenomena are problematised and which are not, which issues and perspectives are silenced, and what is made (in)visible in the process (Bacchi 2009).

A considerable body of feminist research has demonstrated how, throughout different levels of society, men's violence against women is concealed and obscured through a range of linguistic devices and discursive techniques. This contributes to what Romito (2008) has elucidated as the strategies of legitimisation and denial of men's violence against women and children, which are accomplished through six main tactics: euphemising, dehumanising, blaming, psychologising, naturalising, and separating (Westmarland 2015).

Berns (2001) has described how there has been a societal backlash to feminist conceptualisations of men's violence against women, which she calls 'patriarchal resistance'. Patriarchal resistance consists of two main discursive strategies: 'degendering the problem', where the role of gender and power in men's violence is obscured; and 'gendering the blame', where culpability is placed on women for both causing and preventing the violence (Berns 2001). In a study on the coverage of domestic violence in women's magazines, Berns (1999) found that it was typically constructed as a private problem and as the victim's problem, with the focus limited to the individual rather than connected to wider social relations, and the onus placed on women to solve it. In a study of articles about domestic violence in major women's and men's magazines, Nettleton (2011) found that even

within well-meaning narratives victim-survivors were often implicitly blamed for the abuse rather than the male perpetrators, because they were deemed to have chosen the 'wrong partner' for example. In women's magazines, women were expected to bear responsibility for the behaviour of both themselves and their partners, whilst in men's magazines, tolerance and celebration of domestic violence was found (Nettleton 2011).

Meanwhile, in a discourse analysis of both professional and popular literature discussing men's violence against women, Phillips and Henderson (1999) found that amongst the 165 abstracts and 11 full-length articles they examined, there were only eight occasions in which there was a phrasal connection between the violent acts and men. The gender of women as victim-survivors was commonly made visible, but the gender of the perpetrators was left unmentioned, which Phillips and Henderson (1999) argue demonstrates how men's violence against women is conceived as a 'problem of women'. This can arguably also be observed when men's violence against women is described as a 'women's issue', for example (Katz 2006), where attention is taken away from the actual source of the problem: men.

Similarly, Coates and Wade (2007) conducted an analysis of sexual assault trial judgments and found that judges commonly drew from psychological concepts and constructs in order to explain men's use of violence, systematically reformulating deliberate acts of violence into acts which were neither deliberate nor violent. Trial judges also obscured the nature of the sexual assaults through the use of externalising attributions, which portrayed an external force such as alcohol as being the cause. Coates and Wade (2004) argue that these 'psychologising' ascriptions are combined with other linguistic devices to accomplish discursive operations which function to: conceal men's violence, mitigate the perpetrator's responsibility, conceal the resistance of the victim, and blame or pathologise them. The ways in which these discursive practices misrepresent men's violence and women's experiences of it, and obstruct effective interventions, demonstrate that, in the words of Coates and Wade (2007, p. 511), 'the problem of violence is inextricably linked to the problem of representation'.

Every utterance that we choose to express about men's violences towards women contributes to the construction of certain representations of these phenomena. For example, in an analysis of academic journal articles discussing domestic violence, Lamb (1991) found that in the linguistic choices of the authors, the

abuse was typically constructed as 'acts without agents', consistently discursively hiding men's responsibility for it. Meanwhile, Frazer and Miller (2009) compared reports in the mass media about cases of domestic violence where the perpetrator was male and cases where the perpetrator was female, and found that the passive voice was used much more regularly to describe the former. This diminished any emphasis on male perpetrators, demonstrating that such techniques are not necessarily about the phenomenon of domestic violence itself, but specifically about the abuse of women by men.

These are just some examples of how feminist research has illustrated the ways in which we discursively construct and problematise men's violence against women in ways that blur its systemic and gendered foundations (Bacchi, 1999). This project investigates how such representations are constructed at the policy level, using Bacchi's 'What's the problem represented to be?' approach to analysing policy discourses. Bacchi (2009) describes how Foucault's concepts of 'prescriptive texts' and 'practical texts' offer the means for identifying how problems are discursively represented in policy. She contends that policies offer rules, opinions and advice about how one should behave, and are therefore prescriptive texts. In this project, official policy documents provide the 'practical texts', the 'methods of implementation' for prescriptive texts, which provided the point of entry for examining the problematisation of men's violences against women in British and Finnish policies. The following four national government policy documents were analysed: '*Recommendations for the Prevention of Interpersonal and Domestic Violence: Recognise, Protect and Act' (*Ministry for Social Affairs and Health 2008) and '*Action Plan to Tackle Violence Against Women' (*Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2011) from Finland; and '*Call to End Violence to Women and Girls'* (Home Office, 2010) and '*Call to End Violence to Women and Girls: An Action Plan'* (Home Office, 2011) from the UK.

The two British policy documents were published by the Home Office under the Conservative-Liberal Democrat, centre-right coalition government, with the first paper presenting the newly elected government's '*Strategic Vision'* and the second an *'Action Plan'* to discuss how their proposals would be implemented. These documents quickly replaced the paper published by the preceding Labour government one year earlier (HM Government 2009). Meanwhile, the earlier Finnish document, *'Recommendations for the Prevention of Interpersonal and Domestic*

Violence' is focused upon addressing institutional practices in local and regional services to tackle 'interpersonal and domestic violence'. The latter text, also described as an *'Action Plan'*, was the first set of policy proposals put forward by the Finnish government in this area since 2002; demonstrating inaction which had incurred criticism from the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2011). The two papers were published by successive centre-right coalition governments consisting of the Centre Party, National Coalition Party, Green League, and the Swedish People's Party.

All four documents were published and analysed in English, with all government policy documents in Finland being officially translated into both English and Swedish in addition to Finnish. In comparing policy proposals from two unique national contexts, the aim was to gain insights into how men's violence against women is being represented as a policy problem in two contrasting Northern European post-industrial settings with unique histories of policymaking around gendered violence. Kantola (2006) argues that discourses are intertwined with specific historical and cultural contexts, and comparisons can help to reveal discursive silences, differences and similarities in concepts and meanings, and challenge what is taken for granted within specific settings.

The invisibility of men's practices: Six key problem representations

The main finding of this study is that in all four of the policy documents analysed, despite the contextual differences between Britain and Finland, men's practices in relation to violence against women were made almost completely invisible, and the systemic and gendered facets of these phenomena were discursively silenced. The concealment of men's practices was carried out through six key problematisations, which were present in all four texts:

1. A problem of women

All four of the policy documents feature an overriding focus on the practices of victim-survivors, and with the exception of the earlier Finnish document*, 'Recommen-*

dations for the Prevention of Interpersonal and Domestic Violence', the discourse is gendered through representations of the problem as being the victimisation of women. At the beginning of both of the British documents, it is recognised that: '*The vast majority of these violent acts are perpetrated by men on women*' (Home Office 2010, p. 5; Home Office 2011, p. 5). Yet from this point onwards, there are few occasions within either document where the gendered dynamics of these phenomena are alluded to. For example, in the entirety of the UK '*Action Plan*', men are only named 7 times, compared to the 106 times in which women are referred to, and in the '*Strategic Vision*' document, men are only identified 9 times, whilst women are named 219 times. So while a gendered discourse is present, it is only women who are made visible within it. By identifying and naming the victim-survivors, but not the perpetrators, and focusing so exclusively on women's practices, a representation is therefore created where the problem is associated solely with women.

Only the earlier Finnish text does not contain this gendered discourse on the victimisation of women. Whilst the focus is again on victim-survivors, this is carried out in a degendered fashion through the domination of a 'gender-neutral' discourse. For instance, gender-neutral terms for victims appear 37 times compared to 20 references to female victims, whilst gender-neutral terms for perpetrators are used 25 times, compared to zero references to male perpetrators. In the latter Finnish document meanwhile, *'Action Plan to Tackle Violence Against Women'*, women are named 322 times, compared to 206 uses of gender-neutral terms for victims. In comparison, men are referred to 66 times in this text, but only 36 occasions in relation to the perpetration of violence, with 12 of the 66 references being made in the context of the victimisation of men. The following quotation provides one example of how the onus is placed upon victim-survivors to pursue support, whilst the responsibility of the perpetrator to stop using violence is not contemplated: *'If any interpersonal and domestic violence occurs among their [NGOs, parishes and other organisations'] members, information is given on the services and forms of support available, and victims are urged to seek help'* (Ministry for Social Affairs and Health 2008, p. 14).

It is also noteworthy that whilst the prevailing focus is on victim-survivors in these documents, it is through a construction of them as passive recipients of abuse, with little consideration for how they may express agency in their lives. This

is demonstrated by the dominance of the word 'victim' and the near-total absence of language inferring agency, such as the word 'survivor' (Harne and Radford 2008), in all four policy documents. The appropriateness of these different terms is contested, but it is important to note that the more active ways in which women may exhibit agency, such as in resistance to men's violence, are almost entirely ignored. Coates and Wade (2007) write that people resist whenever they are subjected to violence, and that for every history of violence, there is a history of resistance running parallel to it. The routine limiting and dismissal of the agency, resistance and resilience that women who are victims and survivors of men's violence articulate contributes to pathologising and blaming them for the violence they are subjected to by men (Coates and Wade 2004). Agency is denoted upon women in terms of having responsibility for men's behaviour, but seldom discussed in relation to their own selves.

2. A problem without perpetrators

With the focus almost entirely on the victimisation of women, men's practices as the perpetrators of violence are not scrutinised and are barely discussed or even mentioned in any of the four texts, even in degendered terms, leaving the actual agents of the violence unproblematised. This is despite the fact that the 'prevention' of violence against women is emphasised as a key tenet of both governments' approaches. For example, the importance of addressing the roots of men's violence is referred to: *'We are committed to leading by example in challenging the attitudes, behaviours and practices which cause women and girls to live in fear'* (Home Office 2010, p. 9), but what exactly these attitudes, behaviours and practices consist of and who they belong to is not made clear. At no point are connections made to the social construction of men and masculinities, and commitments to prevention are expressed in vague, abstract, degendered statements. For example, in both the latter Finnish paper and the British '*Action Plan*', the 'role of men' in challenging violence against women is referred to. Yet what this role could actually consist of is never explored further, and even within specific chapters on prevention, the emphasis remains on women's practices.

Men's practices are slightly more visible in the latter Finnish paper, where they are intermittently named as perpetrators, and the need to address men's practices

in order to prevent violence against women is implicitly raised on occasion. Yet these gendered constructions of male perpetrators represent exceptions rather than commonalities, and as with the other three documents, men remain fundamentally invisible in this text. This means that men's violence against women is represented as a problem without perpetrators, and men are absolved of responsibility for their violence.

On the occasions that men are made visible, it is just as often as potential victims of phenomena such as domestic violence and sexual violence than as perpetrators. Four out of nine occasions in which men are mentioned in the British *'Strategic Vision'* text, and two out of the four times in the *'Action Plan'*, it is as victim-survivors. The victimisation of men is discussed in this way without being situated within the wider context of gendered patterns of violence. Whilst male victims are obviously important in their own right, focusing on them to the same extent as on men's use of violence can minimise the gendered imbalances of phenomena such as domestic violence and sexual violence and diffuse responsibility for them (Lamb 1991). It risks distorting women's use of violence (Berns 2001) and equating its extent with the violence of men. The extent to which male victim-survivors are focused upon also suggests a contradiction in the notion, repeated in some of the texts, that the victimisation of men is a hidden phenomenon, when it appears that the actors that are concealed in these texts are actually male perpetrators of abuse. In the earlier Finnish document for example, the only occasion in the text where men alone are mentioned at all concerns male victims of sexual violence. This kind of problematisation potentially serves to derail any focus on gendered power relations more than it helps the victimisation of men to be treated with the seriousness that it warrants.

3. A problem without context

Whilst all of the documents apart from the earlier Finnish paper do use the terms 'violence against women' and 'gender-based violence', and acknowledge its connections to gender inequalities, this gendered discourse remains at a superficial level. There is an absence of any deeper problematisation of the context in which these crimes are perpetrated, in terms of how men's violence against women is structured as a cause and consequence of patriarchal power relations, or of the

culture which enables, excuses and legitimises these practices. Nor are substantive linkages made to the structural inequalities which women face and the role they play in enabling, perpetuating, and compounding men's violences against women – or how these factors could be tackled as part of the governments' responses. A gendered analysis of these phenomena is therefore lacking in the four texts.

For example, in the UK documents there appears to be a greater emphasis on questioning the sustainability of funding for women's refuges and rape crisis centres than there is on problematising structural gender inequalities (which, ironically, underlie the under-resourcing of these services in the first place). In all four documents, 'incidents' of phenomena such as domestic violence and sexual violence are represented as problems, but not the social context which enables these crimes to take place. This means that there is not only a silence around the perpetrators of men's violence against women, but also its structural causes. Yet if men's violence against women is rooted in gendered power relations and in the social construction of men and masculinities, then how can it be prevented without these things being addressed? These missing linkages to the patriarchal context of men's violence against women points to an individualised rather than social problematisation in which its systemic and gendered features are left untouched.

4. A gender-neutral problem

In addition to the discursive centring of the victimisation of women, there is also a 'gender-neutral' discourse running through all four of the texts, in which phenomena such as domestic violence and sexual violence are discussed without any reference to the gender of those involved. This is particularly common when the agents of violence are being discussed, so that even when men's use of violence towards women is alluded to, it is typically as gender-neutral, anonymised 'perpetrators', leaving men's practices further hidden from view. However, there are also many occasions across all four documents where this discourse is applied to all actors and men's violences against women is fully degendered.

The discourse of the earlier Finnish document is almost entirely 'gender-neutral'. In the main body of the text, specific references to women, men, or gender are almost non-existent. Rather than being based around a discourse on the victimi-

sation of women, the 'interpersonal and domestic violence' that the paper focuses upon are represented as degendered problems. Where links are made to actual actors, it is almost always in gender-neutral terms. On a number of occasions, not only is the gender of the actor absent, but the connection of that person to the violence itself is also neutralised. For instance, the terms 'customer', 'client', 'patient', 'spouse', 'partner', and 'parent' were used 43 times in this document, both in the context of perpetration and victimisation. The word 'customer' alone appears 30 times.

Given that the defining feature of men's violence against women is its gendered dynamics, 'gender-neutral' problematisations further disguise and distort the roots of these phenomena, as if they affected women and men equally. For instance: *'The aim of the campaign will be to prevent teenagers from becoming victims and perpetrators of abusive relationships'* (Home Office 2011, p. 4). Representations of domestic violence such as this create the impression of a relationship where the abuse might be mutual and shared, rather than the exertion of power and control by men over their female partners.

In the earlier Finnish document, the assertion is also made several times that perpetrators require 'help' in a way that is equated with the support needed by victims. This language again mutualises the experiences of the two groups, as if both victims and perpetrators equally need (and deserve) the same kind of support in order to stop the abuse. For example: *'Interpersonal and domestic violence is easily overlooked as both the victim and the perpetrator find it difficult to report it and seek help because of feelings of shame, guilt and fear'* (Ministry for Social Affairs and Health 2008, p. 14). Kantola (2006) argues that the popular notion in Finland of the need to 'support' male perpetrators of domestic violence is the product of an influential 'family violence' discourse. This discourse risks pathologising men who use violence against women, medicalising them as atypical men in need of 'help' or 'mediation' rather than normal men who choose to use violence. It mitigates men's accountability and responsibility for their violence, by suggesting that they are 'people prone to violence' (Ministry for Social Affairs and Health 2008, p. 28) and that the actions which they need 'help' to stop are somehow out of their control. This may also be reflected in that fact that the Finnish documents are both published by the Ministry for Social Affairs and Health, whilst the British documents are published by the criminal justice-oriented Home Office. It is worth

reflecting on whether other crimes would be discussed in such ways.

A recurring 'gender-neutral' discourse also persists in the second Finnish policy document, in constructions such as the following: *'One-fifth of people living in a partnership say they have sometimes experienced violence or threats of violence from their current spouse or partner'* (Ministry for Social Affairs and Health 2010, p. 14–15). Gender-neutral terms for 'victims' and 'perpetrators' are used 206 and 68 times respectively, and neutralising terms for actors such as 'customer', 'client', 'patient', 'spouse', 'partner', and 'parent' also appear on 125 occasions. This problematisation again blurs, equates and mutualises the experiences and needs of women and men in relation to men's violence. Discourses on 'gender-neutrality' and the victimisation of women therefore blend together, leaving an obfuscated construction of gender in relation to men's violence. However, as with the other texts, neither problematisation focuses upon men's practices, either as degendered perpetrators, or as named men. Men's violences against women are not 'neutral' – they are phenomena which serve to maintain men's dominance of women, on an individual and structural, personal and political basis. Representing phenomena such as domestic violence and sexual violence as 'gender-neutral' problems therefore functions to depoliticise them and hide their connections to gender inequalities.

5. An agentless problem

Lamb (1991) argues that we absolve men of responsibility for domestic violence by concealing the agent in the linguistic choices we make when talking about the phenomenon. This is carried out within a series of problem sentence categories: diffusion of responsibility; acts without agents (passive voice and nominalisation); victims without agents; and gender obfuscation. This kind of agentless discourse was also found running through all four of the policy documents analysed, in relation to men's violence against women more broadly.

Terms appear in all of the texts which diffuse responsibility (Lamb 1991) for men's violences against women, by constructing these phenomena as mutualised experiences rather than exertions of power and control by men against their female partners. For example, domestic violence was described in the four texts in terms such as: 'violent relationships', 'violent families', 'partnership violence', 'vio-

lence among intimate partners', and 'assault in intimate relationships'. These constructions suggest that it is the relationship which is violent, rather than the male perpetrator, as if both partners somehow share responsibility for that violence.

Second, men's violence against women is almost always discussed in the passive voice (Lamb 1991) in the texts. The violence and abuse is represented as actions which are done to women rather than done by men. Indeed, through agent deletion the use of the passive voice frequently extends further, so that women are described as 'experiencing domestic violence', being 'exposed to domestic violence', and being 'at high risk of domestic violence'. The agents of the abuse are almost always missing, and when they are present they are very rarely named as being men, but as degendered 'perpetrators'. In these policy documents women are thus constructed as 'victims without agents' (Lamb 1991).

The instances listed here also demonstrate how different forms of men's violences against women are discursively transformed into personified forces (Coates and Wade 2004), as if the violence itself was the 'agent'. This is through the nominalisation of terms such as domestic violence, which occurs throughout all four texts. It is thus 'domestic violence' which harms women and children, 'domestic violence' which women 'fall victim to', and 'domestic violence' that women are killed 'as a result of', rather than the actual perpetrators. Nominalising men's violences against women entirely removes the agent of the violence from the text, and it constructs these practices in an impersonal and abstract form, disconnecting them from their reality. Non-volitional terms such as 'incident' are also used, rather than volitional terms such as 'action', to describe violence and abuse, again eradicating any semblance of agency from these crimes (Coates and Wade 2004). All of these linguistic choices contribute to a problematisation of men's violences against women where the male agents are invisible, and where the emphasis is placed entirely on the practices of victim-survivors.

Lamb (1991) also pointed out that gender obfuscation is a regular feature of the language we use to discuss domestic violence, through the dominance of gender-neutral terms such as 'victim' and 'perpetrator', as has been found in the texts analysed here. It is notable that in the earlier Finnish document, the gender-neutral terms 'interpersonal and domestic violence' are frequently shortened simply to 'violence'. For instance: '*When a violent person stops using violence, violence is reduced*' (Ministry for Social Affairs and Health 2008, p. 27). Linguistically, such

constructions serve to further distort the reality of men's violences against women as uniquely harmful and pervasive gendered practices, which gender-neutral discourses lay the basis for.

It is also noteworthy that in the British '*Action Plan*' paper, the acronym for violence against women and girls, 'VAWG', is frequently used. It could be argued that acronyms such as this also serve to remove gender from the discourse. 'VAWG' is used so extensively that it becomes a term it its own right, and the victim-survivors, the 'women and girls', become hidden behind it. Indeed, many of the most common terms used for different forms of men's violences against women in the texts arguably also obfuscate gender, such as 'domestic violence', 'interpersonal violence' and 'sexual violence'. This is even the case with the most commonplace term – 'violence against women', which does clearly name the victim, but in the passive voice, and with the agent of the violence entirely absent. It is noteworthy that in the UK documents the phrase 'tackle/tackling violence against women' is used frequently, appearing 27 times in the '*Strategic Vision*' and 19 times in the '*Action Plan*'. Yet this phrase conceals that which actually needs to be tackled – the practices of those (men) who are responsible for the violence.

6. A problem of the Other(s)

In the chapters on prevention in the two British texts, men's violences against women, and especially domestic violence, are also connected with different constructions of deviancy. These include substance abuse, teenage pregnancy, and 'problem families'. This 'troubled families' discourse constructs domestic violence within a wider nexus of behaviour represented as a problem, and in the process dissolves any connections to social structures and gender. Here the problem is individualised and defined as alcohol use, teenage pregnancy, or the family, rather than men's practices and gender inequalities. This externalises men's violence against women to factors such as alcohol consumption and other 'deviant' behaviours and again takes away responsibility from its perpetrators (Coates and Wade 2004). Moreover, it others men's violence against women and associates it with a minority of 'troubled' families from 'vulnerable backgrounds', despite the fact that these phenomena are pervasive throughout society.

In the latter Finnish document meanwhile, a significant portion of the text is

devoted to discussing what are represented as being unique problems of men's violence within migrant communities. In explaining this, the cultural backgrounds of migrants are problematised: *'Some of the immigrants moving to Finland come from countries with a hierarchic and patriarchal social structure, where women's right to equality is far from a matter of course, either in principle or in practice'* (Ministry for Social Affairs and Health 2010, p. 33), and constructed as being more prone to violence. The solution is presented as being greater integration into Finnish society. This implies that by becoming more Finnish, migrants can forgo violence, as if such behaviour, and gendered power inequalities more generally, were otherwise non-existent issues in Finland. In this discourse, men's violence against women is therefore racialised and associated with problems of ethnicity and culture, rather than gender, serving to sustain the notion that 'normal' Finnish men don't commit violence against women.

It is also interesting to note that 9 of the 36 specific references to men's use of violence in this text speak of 'immigrant men'. This suggests that there is more readiness to place responsibility on the male perpetrators of violence against women if they are men from a migrant background. This finding fits with the analysis of Clarke (2011) who argues that, as part of a xenophobic discourse in Finland, migrant communities and migrant men have been constructed as being innately patriarchal and violent. Men's violence against women is represented as a problem of migrant communities, and blamed on cultural differences. The function of culturally essentialising men's violence as only belonging to non-Finnish and non-white men is to further marginalise the phenomenon within wider Finnish society. This problematisation of Others disassociates violence against women from men more generally and from the social structures of male domination, thus hiding the systemic and gendered nature of these practices.

Conclusions

Using Bacchi's 'what's the problem represented to be?' approach, this research project has found that men's practices are made invisible in the discourses of contemporary British and Finnish policy documents on men's violence against women. This is accomplished through six main problem representations: men's violence against women as a problem of women; as a problem without perpe-

trators; as a problem without context; as a gender-neutral problem; as an agent-less problem; and as a problem of the Other(s). By concealing men's practices, the problem representations constructed in these policy discourses place their focus solely upon the practices of women. This serves to absolve men of responsibility for men's violence against women, and shifts it onto the victim-survivors. In the words of Berns (2001), these policy discourses therefore degender the problem, by hiding men's perpetration of violence in a variety of ways, and gender the blame, by placing the onus on women to stop it.

Despite this, is clear that significant achievements have been made by the women's movements in Britain and Finland in forcing the state and wider society to recognise men's violences against women as a major problem. The influence of feminist discourses can be seen in the construction of these phenomena as gendered 'violence against women' in three of the four policy documents that were analysed, for example. This is undoubtedly a step forward; recognising phenomena such as domestic violence and sexual violence as crimes against women is vitally important. However, the embrace of feminist discourses by policymakers appears to remain superficial, with their problematisations featuring only a very limited gender analysis. Whilst the texts do focus on the victimisation of women, this is their only focus, and in this way women are denoted with responsibility for both causing and preventing men's violence, as if it could be stopped if their practices were somehow different. This suggests that policymakers and indeed wider society are more comfortable with accepting the idea of women as victims, than with recognising men's responsibility for that victimisation. It demonstrates that a victim-blaming approach to men's violence against women remains entrenched in policymaking and the state's conception of these phenomena.

In the different policy documents analysed in this study, which were published between 2008 and 2011, there appears to be considerable alignment between the British and Finnish governments in the ways in which men's violence against women is discursively constructed. The earlier Finnish document, *'Recommendations for the Prevention of Interpersonal and Domestic Violence'*, is anchored in 'gender-neutral' discourses, which suggests the influence of the 'genderless' approach which has long been rooted in Finnish social policy more generally (Hearn and McKie 2010). Whilst there was still considerable evidence of this gender-neutral discourse in the latter Finnish text, the *'Action Plan'*, it was much closer to the Brit-

ish documents in constructing these phenomena as the victimisation of women. This (limited) recognition of the importance of gender relations by policymakers may have occurred earlier in the UK because of the strength and pressure the British women's movement has applied from 'outside' of the state in relation to men's violences against women (Hester 2005; Kantola 2006).

The parallels in the problem representations of these documents may also provide evidence of growing international influence in this area, and of supranational institutions such as the EU and the UN playing an increasingly important role in policymaking around men's violence against women. It is notable for instance that in all three of the most recent documents, the UN's definition of violence against women is used. The findings of this study may therefore support the idea that policymaking on these phenomena in some European countries is to some extent converging (Hearn and McKie 2010), at least at the discursive level. However, this is towards problematisations where the victims are made visible, but the perpetrators are made invisible, and a representation of the problem as violence against women but not men's violence. These problematisations may also be influenced by depoliticised neo-liberal conceptions of gender equality, related to the notion of equality of opportunity rather than equality of outcomes (Hearn and McKie 2010). This means treating women and men equally in response to phenomena which are defined by inequality, and rooted in the structural dominance of men and subordination of women. If there is policy convergence then, it may be towards a discourse which addresses the role of gender at a surface level only.

Within the confines of these problem representations, it seems obvious that women should be the focus of attention, when supporting victim-survivors is the clear shared goal. Men's discursive invisibility from the outset means that there is never any expectation for their practices to be examined. By keeping men hidden from the conversation, their practices never enter our consciousness, and the possibility of transforming them is closed off through discursive manoeuvres. This is akin to the 'averted gaze' to gender described by Hearn and McKie (2010) – often in the texts it is implicit that it is men's practices which are being talked about, but it is rarely made explicit. We have a subliminal awareness of men's responsibility for violence against women (and violence more generally), yet never actually confront it.

Of course, such constructions of men's violence against women extend far beyond the policy sphere, and are reflected in the discourses used to talk about

these phenomena on a day-to-day normative basis across society too. Within criminology there continues to be little acknowledgment, scrutiny or explanation of the fact that most violence, and indeed most crime, is committed by men. As a society, we remain reluctant to recognise or confront the systemic violence and abuse men enact against women, its causes, or the complicity among men more generally in its legitimisation. Of course, there are vested interests that are served by sustaining the silence around men's violences, in terms of the maintenance of men's power. Yet social policy presents a platform from which these discourses could be challenged, and new, destabilising problematisations of men's violences could be advocated. However, policies aiming to 'tackle violence against women' are unlikely to have success whilst they simultaneously hide the agents of that violence from view.

Furthermore, a discourse which is centred on women's practices may appear to be separate from commonplace constructions which ignore or minimise phenomena such as domestic violence and sexual violence and dismiss women's perspectives and experiences. Yet the discourses in these texts seemingly reflect precisely the same kind of androcentric standpoint, based on a position of male dominance that actually subjugates women's experiences. Whilst the focus may be on women in these problem representations, it is only in very limited and limiting ways. The intersectional totality of women's lived experiences continues to be marginalised in these policy documents, where women's agency is only represented in relation to the responsibility denoted upon them for men's violence.

It is because the subjectivities, experiences, and perspectives of men are assumed to be the subject and the norm that they are so rarely actually gendered. Men are not named as men because the standpoint of men is what we understand as being universal, as being the default and the 'neutral'. It is precisely because men are invisible from these discourses around men's violence that they function to maintain men's power. The hegemony of men is reproduced – consciously or not – through the concealment of the ways in which men go about maintaining that hegemony. Of course, this does not mean that policy around men's violence against women should not be centred on victim-survivors and their needs – this is essential. However, when the spotlight is exclusively on women's practices and men's practices are obscured, that discourse is about protecting the interests of men's power.

The emphasis on the victimisation of women in these policy documents also belies a fatalistic approach and 'culture of resignation' (Thapar-Björkert and Morgan 2010) towards men's violences against women, where phenomena such as domestic violence and sexual violence are assumed to be inevitable problems that can only be 'managed' by social policy. As systemic social phenomena, through social change men's violences against women can be stopped. However, this will only be possible by identifying and making visible who is responsible for them, and why. That will require a shift in the preventative focus, away from the practices of victim-survivors, and onto the practices of men.

The findings of this project therefore suggest that fundamental change is needed in the approaches of policymakers in both Britain and Finland towards tackling men's violences against women, as campaigned for by feminist movements in both countries. That change is not simply about new policies, but a transformation in the ways in which those policies understand, construct and represent men's violence against women as a problem in the first place. Each one of the four policy documents analysed here emphasised the importance of prevention, and primary prevention does offer a means of moving beyond the resignation, acquiescence and victim-blame articulated by policy responses to men's violences against women. Preventing these phenomena demands that we place a critical spotlight on men and masculinities – onto those with power, and how they go about preserving that power. This means challenging the gender hierarchy that defines the very foundations of the status quo – however that is what is necessary in order to tackle men's violence against women.

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