The child welfare response to domestic violence: 
Exploring the concurrence between the literature, best practice 
guidelines and worker perception in the Ministry for Children and 
Family Development

By

IAN G. DEGEER

Bachelor of Commerce, McMaster University, 1994
Bachelor of Sociology, McMaster University, 1997
Bachelor of Social Work, McMaster University, 1997

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Ian Debeer
Name of Author (please print) 02/03/2004
Date (dd/mm/yyyy)

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Department of Social Work and Family Studies
The University of British Columbia
Vancouver, BC Canada
Increasingly, child welfare authorities have become involved with families where domestic violence is an issue. This has been the result of improved understanding of the impact of witnessing domestic violence on children. However, child welfare has been criticized for the oppressive nature of the interventions with families where domestic violence has occurred. Critics have argued that an absence of understanding about domestic violence by social workers in child welfare has resulted in oppressive practice towards women and children. This study explored the perceptions of social workers in British Columbia’s Ministry for Children and Family Development – South Fraser Region about the barriers to best practice in cases of domestic violence. An extensive literature review revealed eight barriers to best practice that contradict current best practice guidelines for cases of domestic violence. The findings of this study revealed that social workers identified that similar barriers to best practice exist in the South Fraser Region, thereby confirming the concerns in the literature. The use of factor analysis revealed that social workers are attempting to work with non-offending parents in a more supportive manner, but there continue to be systemic problems associated with child welfare services that impede workers ability to practice in a non-oppressive manner. Recommendations for improvement of service provision are outlined and discussed.
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This project is dedicated to the memory of Gillian Hadley.
CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

Purpose of the study

The issue of domestic violence has increasingly become recognized as an important social problem in Canadian society. With increased awareness on this issue, the impact of witnessing domestic violence on children has also become an important issue. Child welfare authorities, those entrusted with the task of investigating allegation of child abuse have subsequently found themselves involved with families where domestic violence is an issue. The increased intervention by child welfare with families where domestic violence is an issue has led to a great deal of criticism about the practice of social workers in these situations. Much of the literature and research on the child welfare response to domestic violence is based upon file reviews, opinion-based articles and reviewing the policy of various child welfare agencies. Very little research on this subject has relied upon front-line staff as a source of data.

This paper documents the findings of a research project about the child welfare system in British Columbia and the issue of domestic violence. The quantitative study was designed to elicit the opinions of front-line staff about the child welfare response to domestic violence. The objective of this study was to determine whether or not social workers agreed with the criticisms identified within the literature and to determine the level of concurrence by social workers to the best practice guidelines associated with these types of cases.

The idea for this study came out of two personal experiences as a child welfare social worker. The first was my involvement in the inquest into the deaths of Gillian and Ralph Hadley in Pickering, Ontario. As a social worker with the Durham Children’s Aid Society, I had the opportunity to work with this family prior to and after the incident of domestic violence. I was
able to see the impact that the violence perpetrated by men had on one woman and her
dedication to the well being of her children. I was also able to observe how various social
systems failed this family and continued to support the oppression of women. As a child welfare
social worker I was able to work with the family, to hold Mr. Hadley accountable while
supporting Ms. Hadley in parenting her children and ensuring their safety. Unfortunately, after
my departure from the agency, Mr. Hadley killed his wife prior to killing himself. At the inquest
into this matter, the practice of the social workers at the Children’s Aid Society were identified
as being appropriate. This experience raised my awareness of the issue of best practice with
respect to such cases as well as the importance of child welfare in general.

The second experience that led to this study is my work in child welfare, which leads me
to confront these difficult cases on a daily basis. The ongoing critical examination of child
welfare practice often does not involve front-line staff, and I was interested in giving them a
voice. I wanted to know their opinions about the criticism of case practice in situations of
domestic violence. I also wanted to know whether they had the same concerns as expressed in
the literature on the subject. Before beginning my study, I believed that social workers would
express some of the same concerns as those represented in the literature, but I also anticipated
some disagreements.

This paper brings together previous research findings and new data gathered from a
questionnaire completed by front-line child protection staff employed by the Ministry for
Children and Family Development in the South Fraser region of British Columbia. The literature
review covers the theoretical basis of this study as well as several areas of practice where social
workers are reported to not consistently follow best practice guidelines as recommended in
professional research and literature. The results of my research demonstrate that social workers
agree with some criticisms and disagree with others. Specifically, social workers agreed with the
literature that there is not adequate training, that male offenders do not receive adequate attention, that the legislation does not consider domestic violence to be a child welfare matter, that the family court system does not understand domestic violence, and that community collaboration is not a regular practice. However, contrary to the literary critic of child welfare, social workers perceived domestic violence to be within their mandate, and social workers were unclear about the use of the feminist theoretical background in their practice. The study also identifies additional latent themes which suggest that social work practice is shifting from the protective role to one of a supportive family ally in the struggle to end violence against women and children. Finally, recommendations for social work policy and practice are discussed.

This project aims to assist in the improvement of social work practice in cases of domestic violence. Its primary goal is to identify ways of improving current practice. It is my hope that there will be no more inquests, but only investment in the child welfare system to support front-line staff.
The prevalence of violence against women

In order to set forth the context of this research project, it is necessary to understand the extent of violence against women in Canadian society. Statistics Canada's report *Family Violence in Canada: A Statistical Profile 2002* establishes the extent of reported family violence in Canada (Trainor, 2002). This report indicates that in 2002 women made up the majority of victims in all categories of spousal violence reported to the police. More specifically, in 2002, 85 percent of all victims of spousal assault were women (Trainor, 2002). The report also highlights that between 1995 and 2000 the number of overall spousal assault victims increased (male and female victims) and the number of female victims was much higher than male victims during this time period (Trainor, 2002).

The report also identified that nearly half of the women who experienced violence in their home were physically harmed and more women identified as being fearful of their assailant than men (Trainor, 2002). Physical violence was not the only highlight noted in this report. There were also emotional consequences identified as a result of the violence. Many women suffered side effects of the violence including sleep disorders, depression and anxiety as a result of experiencing spousal violence (Trainor, 2002). Experiencing spousal violence impacts women's ability to participate in society as many women have to take time off of work or are hospitalized due to injuries. (Trainor, 2002). Trainor (2002) identified that women who are victims of domestic violence are also more likely than men to have physical impairments and mental health problems as a result of experiencing domestic violence.
The statistics demonstrate that in Canadian society women experience domestic violence far more than men. While men are also victims of spousal violence, the rates of violence towards women are much higher. The data presented in the document, *Family Violence in Canada: A Statistical Profile 2002* suggests that in order to truly understand spousal violence in Canadian society, one must understand that women are at greater risk of experiencing spousal violence than men. It is this perspective that informs this project.

**The impact of domestic violence on children**

The issue of domestic violence does not only impact adults. The prevalence of this issue has created an emerging awareness that children are also affected by the presence of violence in their home. Several studies have demonstrated that children who witness domestic violence can suffer negative consequences as a result (Wolak and Finkelhor, 2002; Appel and Holden, 1998).

The negative impact on children of domestic violence can be both physical and emotional. Straus and Gelles (1996) found that in homes where there is domestic violence, children are physically harmed 50% of the time. Injuries to children can also occur when they attempt to intervene in their parents' arguments in an attempt to stop the violence in their home (Jaffe, Wolfe, and Wilson, 1990).

Exposure to domestic violence can also harm children developmentally and emotionally. Children who are exposed to domestic violence can exhibit a range of developmental and emotional problems including sleeplessness, difficulty concentrating, self isolation, hyper vigilance and irritability (Wolak and Finkelhor, 2002). Wolak and Finkelhor (2002) identified that several studies suggest that boys who witness domestic violence are more likely to behave more aggressively than girls. This means that boys may be replicating the behaviours set for by their primary male role model and may be at risk for perpetrating similar behaviours in the
future. Girls were found to internalize their feelings and to be more likely to suffer from depression and anxiety (Wolak and Finkelhor, 2002).

Research on the issue of children witnessing domestic violence is that children in these situations are at risk of being harmed. This has led to changes in the manner in which social service agencies perceive and intervene in these situations. Specifically, the child welfare response to cases of domestic violence has dramatically changed as a result of the research on children who witness domestic violence.

The current child welfare response to domestic violence

The growing body of literature that highlights the importance of addressing the issue of children who are exposed to violence has led to a gradual change in the manner in which child welfare authorities respond to this issue. Child welfare authorities are now dealing with the issue of domestic violence more than ever. The Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect (Trocme, Fallon, Daciuk, Billingsley, Tourigny, Mayer, Wright, Barter, Burford, Hornick, Sullivan, Mckenzie, 2001) identified the prevalence of this issue in child welfare. This report, which categorized witnessing domestic violence under emotional maltreatment, found that there were approximately 21,132 investigated emotional maltreatment cases that involved exposure to family violence in Canada in 1998 (Trocme et al., 2001). This increase in these types of cases has led to changes in some province’s legislation. Other provinces including Alberta, and Nova Scotia have amended their child welfare legislation to reflect the impact of domestic violence on children and to provide social workers with the mandate to intervene in families where domestic violence is an issue. In British Columbia, the issue of domestic violence is not identified within the Child, Family and Community Service Act (CF&CSA), the legislation that mandates child welfare services.
However, the current practice of social workers in British Columbia is to include domestic violence as part of the mandate and code or identify these files in a manner that does not truly reflect the issue at hand. Often these cases are coded as risk of physical harm, emotional harm or in some cases as a parent unable/unwilling to protect the children. While each of these possible codings identifies one possible aspect of the impact of domestic violence, none of these actually labels the primary issue as being the violence. The absence of a clear legislative mandate for social workers in these cases was identified by Nixon (2001) as being problematic because it does not provide any clear direction for social workers to intervene in these situations.

The primary role for social workers in child welfare in British Columbia is the safety of the children (Ministry for Children and Families, 1999). In cases of domestic violence, the role of social workers is to assess the safety of the children in light of the violence. In many of these situations, the children remain with the non-offending parent, usually the mother. Social workers often rely upon the non-offending parent as the individual to ensure the safety of the children, which may include restricting the access of the offender to the children. The reliance upon the non-offending parent to ensure the safety of the children also means that if the children should be exposed to violence in the future the social worker will have to assess the protective capacity of that parent in light of the ongoing violence. Should the social worker assess that the non-offending parent is able to ensure the safety of the children, support services may be offered to the family and the file would be subsequently closed.

**A feminist framework to understanding domestic violence**

The issue of domestic violence affects women more than men. According to Statistics Canada women are more frequently the victims of abuse by males than vice versa (Trainor, 2002). For this reason, a feminist perspective will significantly inform this project. I began my research armed with a feminist understanding of society, guided by the gendered nature of my
relationship with women, and filled with the desire to work towards societal change for the betterment of the lives of women and children. The use of feminist theory enables this study to begin with a very specific perspective on this issue. Feminist theory places women at the center of the research as opposed to the periphery, where women’s issues have traditionally resided in our society (Callahan, 1993).

**Defining domestic violence**

The task of defining domestic violence may seem at times insurmountable given the multiple dimensions and various aspects of violence. There are two separate issues that must be addressed in attempting to define domestic violence; the first is identifying an adequate name for the violence and the second is adequately defining what constitutes domestic violence. Domestic violence can range from overt physical violence and emotional abuse to more subtle forms of violence such as financial abuse. The establishment of a working definition of domestic violence is further complicated by the theoretical perspective being employed. For instance, some feminists do not utilize the term “domestic violence” at all, claiming that the gender neutrality of the term distracts from its gender-based nature.

While one of the greatest accomplishments of the feminist movement was the re-naming of domestic violence, even among feminists there is no clear consensus as to what constitutes domestic violence. Some feminists such as Duffy (1995) refrain from utilizing the term “domestic violence” and rather prefer to identify the issue of violence against women and categorize the violence into physical and sexual abuse. Duffy identifies the term “wife abuse” as male violence against women in a marital setting but reiterates that wife abuse is simply a form of violence against women.

Other feminist authors including bell hooks choose to use the term ”patriarchal violence” because it captures the erroneous belief that “it is acceptable for a more powerful individual to
control others through various forms of coercive force” (hooks, 2000, p. 61). bell hooks claims that the term “patriarchal violence” is more useful than the term “domestic violence,” because it continually acts as a reminder that violence in the home is connected to sexism, sexist thinking, and to male domination (hooks, 2000).

While feminists are re-defining domestic violence in order to keep the focus on the gendered nature of the violence, this is not a phenomenon observed in the rest of the literature. Many of the articles reviewed for this project utilized the term “domestic violence” when referring to violence against women, but fail to define it for the reader. The absence of a succinct definition within the literature is an indication of the abstract nature associated with the topic and indicative of the struggle to clearly define domestic violence as part of this project.

In some cases, references to the gender-based nature of the violence are deemed unacceptable. When I was in the process of obtaining permission for this project, I found that the Ministry for Children and Family Development was uncomfortable with the initial draft of the survey which explicitly stated that domestic violence is gender-based.

In light of feminist and other definitions of domestic violence, I wanted to utilize a definition that would closely approximate that utilized by social workers in the child welfare field. However, I could not find a coherent definition in the materials utilized by the Ministry for Children and Family Development. Therefore, I shifted the focus of the definitions available to me to the physical aspects of domestic violence. However, my understanding of the causes of domestic violence still reflects feminism, the theoretical foundation of this project.

Duffy (1995) states that violence against women encompasses a range of actions and behaviours. However, she focuses only on the physical aspects of violence. Bograd defines wife abuse as being “the use of physical force by men against his intimate cohabitating partner” (Bograd, 2000, p.12). This definition will be the basis for the current research project, as it closely approximates
the definition of domestic violence that would justify a response from child welfare authorities in the South Fraser region and encompasses a wide range of actions by the male towards his partner. It highlights the physical nature of the violence that most likely would place a child at risk of physical harm, thereby warranting child welfare involvement. The focus on violence is also important according to Bograd (2000), because violence may qualitatively change the nature of an intimate relationship.

**Liberal feminism**

There are numerous branches of feminism, and each could be utilized to help understand violence against women and the role of child welfare. The divergence in the feminist school of thought is due to the fact that as women’s private and public roles have expanded and changed, the definition of feminism has broadened (Mandell, 2001). Mandell (2001) identifies four common concerns of feminist research that will guide the current research project: (1) feminists seek to understand the gendered nature of social and institutional relations; (2) gender relations are constructed as problematic and are related to other inequities; (3) gender relations are socially constructed; and (4) feminist theorists advocate for social changes.

As a starting point for the study, I establish that the perspective of liberal feminism closely approximates the values that I hold as a researcher and a social worker. Liberal feminism is the legacy of the Enlightenment, which asserted that individuals have certain natural rights and that each person should be allowed freedom of choice (Elliott and Mandell, 1995). Liberal feminism seeks “female equality with men by extending women those rights and privileges being offered to men” (Kolmar and Bartowski, 2000, p. 26). This perspective advocates for social and legal reform through policy change directed at creating opportunities for women in society (Kolmar and Bartowski, 2000). Other goals of liberal feminism include the end of women’s legal, economic and social dependence upon men, freedom to engage in education and training,
and the enactment of laws and public policies that guarantee equality of choice and opportunity (Elliott and Mandell, 1995). More contemporary liberal feminists seek to ensure female equality with men through the extension of the rights and privileges offered to men in our society, including the right to be free from violence (Elliott and Mandell, 1995). Liberal feminism is congruent with this research project, as the aim of both is equality for women. This could include the opportunity to parent their children alone or not being the focus of child protection investigations.

A feminist understanding of domestic violence

The use of feminism as the theoretical foundation of this study influences the understanding of domestic violence. Historically, according to Dobash and Dobash (1979), it was believed that within marriages and within society men had the right to dominate and control women, while women were expected to be subservient. Feminists have played an important role in helping women to voice and expose the violence they endure. Current feminist thinking states that violence towards women is about power and control. Any discussion of the issue of domestic violence that encompasses the feminist perspective must therefore include a discussion of patriarchy, as “patriarchy refers to the societal institutionalization of male dominance over women in the family and throughout society, particularly in terms of economic domination of women” (Duffy, 1995, p.152). Duffy (1995) makes it clear that it is most important that “violence between men and women in the family can be understood as an expression of power dynamics” reinforced by societal patriarchy (p.143). Duffy (1995) also asserts that “violence is a reflection of the patriarchal tradition” of our society (p.143). Feminists believe that the separation between public and private life denies women the protection they require and that the public rights of women should translate into their private lives as well (Abrar and Lovenduski, 2000). Feminists also argue that women are vulnerable in their homes and that their husbands'
use of force is an expression of their unequal status, authority and power (Dobash and Dobash, 1979).

Another important aspect of the feminist analysis of domestic violence is the concept of gender and power. Feminists believe that our society is based on gender stratification, with males comprising the dominant class and women comprising the oppressed class (Bograd, 1988). Violence is thus used by men against women as a means of social control. In this way, all men benefit from the restrictions and limitations placed on women's lives. A feminist understanding of the gendered nature of society and the impact of violence is an important component of this research project and the exploration of child welfare's response to domestic violence.

**Feminism and the state**

Feminism also provides an analysis of the role of the state in maintaining the oppression of women. The second wave of feminists were concerned with theorizing about the state's role in maintaining oppressive social relations towards women (Charles, 1995). Gordon (1986) postulates that child welfare is a form of social control and that welfare provides the state with leverage to supervise women's private lives. She also argues that this serves as a form of control in relation to the material interests of the more dominant (male) group. Liberal feminists have tended to affect change by becoming involved in the governing system and influence it from within (Charles, 1995). Consistent with the liberal feminist perspective, this study identifies the provincial government as a body that maintains the oppression of women, since it is the provincial government that runs child welfare programs in British Columbia.

The liberal feminist perspective on child welfare asserts that child welfare is in an oppressive state that legitimates professional intervention into working class families (Gordon, 1986). Child welfare, according to some feminists, imposes a specific and accepted style of parenting upon clients and determines how parents should behave towards their children. With
relation to the child welfare system, it is important to note the influence that the women’s
movement has had. Specifically, this includes feminist influence on the diagnosis of the causes
of child abuse as well as the campaign against child abuse that came out of the feminist critique
of violence. This research project utilizes feminist understanding of the child welfare system in
British Columbia. This includes the understanding that child welfare in British Columbia
represents a patriarchal structure which liberal feminists have identified as creating policies that
marginalize women and prevent equality between men and women. As a researcher who works
in the field of child welfare, I begin this research from within the state and have as my goal
creating a positive change in the welfare of women and children.

The feminist critique of the child welfare response to domestic violence

As child welfare authorities have become increasingly involved in families where
domestic violence occurs, many feminist theorists have become increasingly critical of the policy
and practice of social workers in child welfare involved in these cases. These concerns include
focusing on the mother’s ability to protect, the child-centered nature of child welfare and the
absence of attention paid to the male offender.

In order to fully understand the feminist critique of the child welfare response to domestic
violence, it is necessary to understand the role of women in Canadian society. Traditionally the
primary role of women in Canadian society has been that of caregivers (Baines, Evans and
Neysmith, 1991). This includes caring for others inside the family home and is often invisible as
it is not part of the definition of labour. Women have often been relegated to the role of caregiver
due to the gender stereotypes that exist within our society that dictates that women should take
on the role of caregiver while the male is the provider. This has also extended into the workforce
where women have traditionally occupied positions in caregiving professions. The reality
remains the same in the home, where work is unpaid and undervalued and in the workplace where it is poorly paid and undervalued (Baines et al., 1991).

The presumption that the role of women in families is that of caregiver dictates the manner in which social programs and policies respond to the needs of families. Many social welfare policies and programs are rooted in the assumption that the role of women is that of caregiver (Baines et al., 1991). Child welfare is one social program that is rooted in the assumption that women are primary caregivers. In British Columbia, many child welfare files are activated under the mothers’ name as it is assumed that she is the primary caregiver. The focus of investigations is often the mother and this reinforces the gender stereotypes that exist in our society. For example, in the Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect, the authors found that 41% of all investigations occurred in lone female parent homes (Trocme et al., 2001).

The feminist critique of the child welfare response to domestic violence is predicated upon the fact that the focus of these investigations is often the non-offending parent or mother. Child welfare efforts tend to focus on the battered women’s ability to protect her children. As mothers are viewed as being responsible for the care of the child, if something should go wrong, the mother is often blamed for being inadequate or negligent in her duties (Callahan, 1993; Nixon, 2001). In this manner child welfare reinforces the gender stereotypes in our society associated with care giving and the protection of the children.

Another important component of the feminist critique is that child welfare interventions separate the interests of women and children. The mandate of child welfare clearly establishes that the safety and well-being of the child are paramount (Ministry of Children and Families, 1999). The child-focused mandate of child welfare means that the needs of the child are primary while the needs of the non-offending parent may be ignored. This philosophy discards the idea of
supporting the non-offending parent in ensuring the safety of her children. This does not encourage social workers to take into consideration that the best interests of children can be served by keeping them with their mothers and that ensuring the safety and well-being of the non-offending parent is a way of ensuring the safety of the child.

It is important to note that removing a child from parental care would not be inconsistent with the feminist philosophy. In situations where a mother is clearly placing a child at risk of being harmed, a feminist perspective would not oppose the removal of the child for the benefit of the child. This would be consistent with the feminist belief of ending violence towards any individual, not just women.

Many feminists are also critical of child welfare's use of 'failure to protect' clauses to label the non-offending parents behaviour (Davies and Krane, 1996; Nixon, 2001). Failure to protect is the term utilized by child welfare in situations where the non-offending parent is perceived to have placed the children at additional risk of harm by exposing them to the male offender or to another incident of violence. In the legislation, failure to protect is interpreted using Section 13(1)(h) of the CF&CSA states that a child needs protection “if the child’s parent is unable or unwilling to care for the child and has not made adequate provision for the child’s care” (Ministry for Children and Families, 1999, p. 15). Feminists argue that the use of failure to protect clauses fails to take into consideration that the non-offending parent is often unable to protect herself from the offender. In this manner, the use of failure to protect clauses by social workers ignores the gendered nature of domestic violence and the fact that often many women are unable to physically protect themselves from their abusive partners, let alone their children.

Finally, feminists are concerned about child welfare’s avoidance of the male offender in cases of domestic violence. The child centered mandate of child welfare and focus on the protective ability of the non-offending parent often results in the male offender not receiving
adequate attention during these cases. As such his behaviour is often ignored and not the focus of the intervention. Feminists advocate for increased attention to the male offender in order to hold him accountable for his behaviours and to ensure that the focus of these cases remains on the violence and its impact on women and children.

**The development of the eight barriers to best practice**

Prior to embarking on this research project, I explored the literature on child welfare and domestic violence as well as numerous best practice guidelines for social workers dealing with domestic violence. In reviewing this material it became apparent that several themes were recurrent throughout the literature. These themes were criticisms about various aspects of the child welfare response to domestic violence. It was these recurring themes that became the basis for the research project. From the literature, I identified eight themes that became the basis of the research project. These were (1) social worker training, (2) the family court system, (3) the utilization of 'failure to protect' clauses by social workers, (4) social worker perception of domestic violence, (5) child welfare legislation, (6) avoidance of the male offender, (7) the absence of community collaboration and (8) the guiding principles of child welfare. The literature review which follows is organized along the eight themes, with each section outlining the meaning or intent of the theme, the research on the theme, and the ways in which the theme is interpreted within the practice guidelines. A brief discussion that outlines how the research project will explore the theme concludes each section. In addition to the research and literature on this topic, I reviewed several best practice guidelines associated with cases of domestic violence. These guidelines are from American agencies and highlight the expectations for social workers in these cases. As part of the literature review, which highlights the criticisms, I also identified the 'best practice' as identified within these documents.
Social worker training as barrier to best practice

The process of entering the field of child welfare often commences with training individual social workers on various tasks or practice standards associated with child protection. Since training is the major focus of this research project, it is important to make the distinction between social work education and child welfare training. The education of social workers commences and occurs primarily at the post secondary level, where student social workers are exposed to many theoretical frameworks. Undergraduate social work education creates generalist social worker practitioners. Child welfare training, on the other hand, is specific training that a social worker undergoes in preparation for employment in the field of child welfare. In British Columbia, training for child welfare occurs within post secondary child welfare specialization programs or through the pre-employment program offered by the Ministry for Children and Family Development. This project defines training as the practical, hands-on learning that is done in preparation for the day-to-day tasks associated with child protection.

The purpose of child welfare training should be to prepare social workers for practice in the field. For example, it is within the training environment that social workers learn about child abuse and the step-wise interviewing techniques utilized in child protection. Therefore, child welfare training should be the venue where social workers learn about the issue of domestic violence as well as the theoretical and practical tools required to deal with violence cases in an effective manner. The literature on child welfare has identified the importance of appropriate training for social workers which aims to ensure effective and anti-oppressive practice. Training is therefore an important component to the child welfare response to cases of domestic violence. Therefore, the absence of appropriate training should be considered to be a barrier to best practice.
There is evidence that training social workers on the issue of domestic violence improves their attitude and response towards it. Magen and Conroy (1994) found that training programs designed specifically to increase insight into the issue of domestic violence for child welfare workers produced statistically significant changes in worker attitudes towards domestic violence. They also found that training reduced the belief that wife assault is justified and increased the belief that batterers should be punished (Magen and Conroy, 1994). According to the authors of the study, training is likely to lead to changes in practice in cases of domestic violence, including increased support for female victims and increased attention on male offenders. By implication, the absence of specialized training may well result in less than acceptable practice of social workers in child welfare.

Critics of child welfare note the absence of adequate training to deal with the issue of domestic violence (Eichlin and Marshall, 1995; Humphreys, 1999). This absence of training results in social workers being unprepared to deal with cases of domestic violence. Eichlin and Marshall argue that the inadequate response to the issue of domestic violence by child welfare professionals might be related to their lack of understanding of the dynamics of domestic violence (Eichlin and Marshall, 1995). Humphreys (1999) also concludes that lack of training affects the quality of service to families where domestic violence is an issue.

Poor preparation of social workers manifests itself as poor practice with families, while adequate training of social workers is more likely to result in more effective and anti-oppressive practice. With reference to changes in the child welfare system in Massachusetts, Whitney and Davies (1999) found that additional training of social workers improved their response to cases of domestic violence. She indicated that adequate training of social workers shifted the focus from battered women to the actions of the offenders. In addition, training has also been observed to improve awareness, understanding, and motivation of caseworkers and their supervisors, while
providing them with useful tools and resources for dealing with domestic violence (Aron and Olson, 1997).

Training is perceived to be such an important aspect of worker preparation for intervening in cases of domestic violence that several practice guides have identified the need for specific training on this issue. The Massachusetts Department of Social Services (1999), in a positive advance in this field has been enforcing mandatory training for all new staff since 1989. In addition, the United States National Association of Public Child Welfare Agencies (NAPCWA) has clearly outlined in their guidelines that child welfare workers should be cross-trained with domestic violence advocates as part of their preparation for working with families where domestic violence exists (Foley, Berns, Test, and Lien Bragg, 1999). Santa Clara County Social Services has also identified the need for social workers to be aware of their own belief systems and to understand the complexity of the issue of domestic violence (Santa Clara County Social Services Agency, 2002). In addition, the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, Family Violence Department, states that training of staff is an integral component of an effective response to the issue of domestic violence (Schechter and Edleson, 1999). It further states that training should be held on a regular and frequent basis due to high staff turnover in this field.

Several authors recommend mandatory training on this topic for all child welfare workers including information on adult-to-adult domestic violence, child maltreatment, and the impact of witnessing domestic violence on children. Aron and Olson (1999) in a study of five community responses to domestic violence identified the importance of initial education, training, and ongoing assistance for staff to ensure an adequate agency response to domestic violence. Carter and Schechter (1997) advocate for a minimum of two days of training on the issue of domestic violence and indicate that this training should cover not only the issue of domestic violence, but
the development of screening skills for the abuse of women as well. Eichlin and Marshall (1995) state that domestic violence training should be accompanied by training on feminism and that it should make workers aware of the current research on the issue of the abuse of women. Other authors have also advocated for training for all child welfare staff (Edleson and Beeman, 2000; Magen, 1999).

In addition to improving child welfare response to domestic violence, training can serve the purpose of enhancing community collaboration. This can take the form of cross training, which is the process of jointly training child welfare workers with other community professionals. One component of cross training is that each agency receives education on the role of the other, thus enhancing mutual understanding and creating a setting for collaboration outside of the training environment. Findlater and Kelly (1999) discuss the collaboration between child welfare services and battered women’s services in Michigan as an important component of reducing barriers between these two fields. This recognition of the need for collaboration and cross training has led to improved practice by workers when dealing with cases of domestic violence (Findlater and Kelly, 1999). Similarly, Beeman, Hagemeister and Edleson (1999) found that cross training between child welfare services and battered women’s services increased the child welfare workers’ understanding of the dynamics of domestic violence.

The current research will focus on the absence of adequate training as a barrier to best practice. Respondents will be asked about the amount of training they have received and the perceived adequacy of training for social workers in the South Fraser region. This project will also attempt to assess the impact of training on social work practice and beliefs of social workers. At the commencement of this project, I hypothesized that training would impact the manner in which social workers intervened in these cases and the beliefs that they would hold about the issue of domestic violence.
The guiding principles of child welfare as a barrier to best practice

Child welfare practice is based on philosophical principles or premises, which guide the activities of social workers during the course of investigations (Spears, 2000, Government of British Columbia, 1999). While each social worker may utilize a different perspective or theory to inform his or her practice, there is an underlying philosophical or theoretical foundation in the field of child welfare. In British Columbia, the guiding principles have the safety and well being of children as their focus (Government of British Columbia, 1999). This includes the idea that the best interests of the children should remain paramount during investigations. The literature is critical of this perspective in cases of domestic violence as it separates the interests of mothers and children. Those who are critical of current child welfare practices argue that a theoretical shift is required to improve the practice of social workers in cases of domestic violence. Otherwise, the guiding principles of child welfare could continue to act as a barrier to best practice.

Several authors have attempted to identify the philosophical background or core values associated with child welfare. Spears (2000) identifies the core values of child protection as the safety of the child, the child’s well being, and the need for a permanent family. In British Columbia, as mentioned above, the safety and well being of children is considered to be the paramount objective of service delivery (Government of British Columbia, 1999). The Santa Clara County Social Services Agency (1999) identifies the safety of the child as the priority for child welfare. Finally, Aron and Olsen (2000) also establish that child protection exists to ensure the safety and well being of children and to promote improved family functioning. However, the overall mission of child welfare is to protect children from harm.

In addition to the child-focused practice being espoused in literature, research has established that social workers adhere to this principle in their practice. However, Beeman et al.
(1999), in their study of barriers to best practice, identified this child-centered philosophy of child welfare as a barrier to successful practice in cases of domestic violence. Their study revealed that social workers were not prepared to sacrifice the well being of the child in order to ensure the safety of the mother, thereby reinforcing the separation of the interests of mother and child (Beeman et al., 1999). Beeman’s study argued that while child protection focuses on the best interests of the child, the workers often feel that this excludes the welfare of the child’s mother. As a result, Beeman argues that child welfare continues to use failure to protect clauses when describing the behaviour of the non-offending parent.

Callahan (1993) offers an alternative to the current child welfare guidelines used for cases involving domestic violence. Callahan argues that the theoretical background of child welfare ignores any sort of analysis of power and gender. Therefore, child welfare practitioners should utilize feminist theory in cases involving domestic violence. Callahan states that women’s inequality is maintained by the current child welfare system and that the system “perpetuates the division between public and private realms that are at the heart of women’s inequality and their ability to enjoy full citizenship” (Callahan, 1993, p.174). A shift in the philosophical foundation of child welfare towards the utilization of the feminist perspective would place the experiences of women at the center of focus as opposed to the periphery (Callahan, 1993).

The use of feminist theory would join the interests of women and children, as opposed to keeping them separate like in the current system. Humphreys (2000) further articulated this point when he states that “progressing the idea that protecting and supporting the child’s mother in situations of domestic violence is also good protection” (p.3). Eichlin and Marshall (1995) share Callahan’s point of view and believe that all domestic violence training for social workers should include a section on feminist theory. The use of a feminist perspective by social workers would alter the assessment of situations of domestic violence by social workers. Utilizing a feminist
perspective would provide social workers with a more informed understanding of the gendered nature of the violence and the relationship between the safety of the child and the safety of the mother. As a result of this insight, the fundamental focus of the investigation would be on the behaviours of the male offender as opposed to the non-offender parents' ability to protect their children.

The practice guidelines associated with cases of domestic violence appear to reflect the sentiment of the movement towards the feminist model of practice. The National Association of Public Child Welfare Agencies states that one of the practice standards of domestic violence cases is family-centered practice, which includes interventions focusing on the safety of adult and child victims and which holds batterers accountable (Schechter and Edleson, 1999). The NAPCWA also advocates for keeping the interests of both women and children in mind when offering services (Schechter and Edleson, 1999). Both of these guidelines appear to advocate for a 'feminist-based' approach of practice in cases of domestic violence.

The guiding principles of child welfare will be explored as part of this research project. The study will attempt to ascertain whether social workers agree with the suggestion that the focus of child welfare should be the safety of the child or whether it should be the safety of the mother as well. The study will also explore the level of the social workers' adherence to feminist theory when assessing situations of domestic violence. I hypothesized that those social workers who indicated that they used feminist theory would approach cases of domestic violence in a manner that would be consistent with the feminist philosophy. In this manner, the study will be able to identify the level of correspondence between literature and practice.
Avoiding the male offender as a barrier to best practice

In cases of domestic violence, the statistics indicate that the majority of violent offenders are male (Trainor, 2002). There has been a lot of criticism expressed with regards to the manner in which child welfare workers deal with male offenders. Much of this criticism involves the child welfare system's failure to hold the male offender accountable for the violence or to engage him in the case planning process at all. This failure can result in an increased focus on the female victim and her ability to protect the children. Due to the fact that the literature is critical of the manner in which the child welfare system deals with the male offender, this theme is considered to be a potential barrier to best practice and will be explored as part of this research project.

The main criticism expressed in the literature is that male offenders are invisible within the child welfare process and are avoided in the investigative process. Beeman et al. (1999) argue that child welfare does not hold male offenders responsible and that this is a barrier to successful practice. This may be due to the fact that the primary concern for child welfare is the safety of the children. Therefore, provided that the children are safe, there may be no perceived need to involve the male offender or to pursue him in order to assess his risk to re-offend. However, Aron and Olsen (2000) state that any effective intervention with families where domestic violence has been identified should include holding the perpetrator of the violence accountable.

The literature suggests that social workers in child welfare do not engage with the male offender. Humphreys' (1999, 2000) study of social work practice found that social workers often avoided the male offender during the course of an investigation. She also found that instead of addressing the issue of violence with the offender, the social worker often named other issues as the problem. The study conducted by Humphreys indicates that social workers often do not
engage with the male offender and, as a result, the issue of the violence by the male offender is not addressed.

Practice guidelines associated with cases of domestic violence emphasize the importance of working with the male offender as part of ensuring effective practice. Carter and Schechter (1997) state that holding perpetrators accountable for violent behaviour is essential to protecting children. They outline six ways in which child welfare can improve the accountability of male offenders. They are as follows:

"1. Substantiate cases on the domestic violence perpetrator for physical abuse, endangerment and/or neglect.
2. Substantiate cases on the batterer for emotional maltreatment.
3. Non-residing perpetrators should also be held accountable.
4. Utilize court orders to order perpetrators out of the home.
5. Social workers should work with the police.

The National Association of Public Child Welfare Agencies recommends batterer accountability for dealing with cases of domestic violence (Foley et al., 1999). Its policy guidelines indicate that one of the desired outcomes of any intervention by child welfare is for batterers to be held accountable for their abusive behaviour and to receive interventions that address their violent behaviour. A similar policy forms part of the guidelines in Santa Clara County (Santa Clara County Social Services Agency, 2002) and of the practice and policy guidelines established by the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (Schechter and Edleson, 1999).

It is clear that there is a gap between the literature with respect to male offenders and practice guidelines. The literature indicates that child welfare workers avoid the male offender during the course of an investigation and focus on the female victim instead. In contrast, the policy and practice guidelines reviewed above are clear about the necessity of dealing with male offenders as part of any investigation and case planning. This discrepancy between the literature
and practice guidelines illustrates the importance of dealing with the male offender. They also clearly show how the absence of such measures can become a barrier to best practice. This research project explores the problem of dealing with the male offender and attempts to ascertain whether social workers feel that male offenders receive adequate attention by child welfare authorities. I believed that social workers would indicate that there are inadequate levels of resources and that social workers would further indicate that the male offender does not receive adequate attention as part of the case practice. Survey responses will help to estimate the degree to which social workers in child welfare agree with the literature and research on the subject.
Child welfare legislation as a barrier to best practice

The field of child welfare and child protection is governed by legislation outlining the mandate of social workers. This legislation is an important component of the child welfare system, as it is within this legislation that the role and function of the child welfare authorities are outlined. In British Columbia, the Child, Family and Community Services Act (CF&CSA) is the piece of legislation mandating child welfare services. Section 13 of the CF&CSA specifically outlines when a child may be in need of protection. However, Section 13 does not include the issue of domestic violence or a child witnessing domestic violence as a protection concern (Ministry for Children and Families, 1999). As a result, when a case is activated due to concerns of domestic violence, it usually falls under the category of emotional harm or parental failure to protect. This places significant constraints on the social workers’ involvement and introduces considerable role ambiguity. The absence of a clear legislative mandate in cases of domestic violence will be explored as part of this research project.

Eichlin and Marshall (1995) advocate for the inclusion of witnessing domestic violence in the legislation governing child welfare. They state that one of the current problems with child welfare is the lack of a succinct and clear definition of child abuse that includes witnessing domestic violence. They indicate that the current legislated definition of when a child is in need of protection is “too vague, too broad and not inclusive enough” (Eichlin and Marshall, 1995, p.7). They also indicate that the gender-neutral terms used in the legislation, such as “domestic violence” or “domestic disharmony,” lead to situations where neither the perpetrator nor the victim is identified. Therefore, they advocate for a more inclusive definition of child abuse, one that includes witnessing domestic violence as a protection concern.

The most definitive study of the impact of legislation on child welfare practice was conducted by Nixon (2001). Her study focused on the impact of Alberta’s child welfare
legislation on the response to the issue of domestic violence. Her study produced three recommendations with respect to legislation and child welfare practice. The first is that child welfare authorities should exercise caution when considering adding children who witness domestic violence to the legislation. This could have the opposite effect than intended because many women may fear losing their children and may not report domestic violence as a result.

Secondly, any change in the legislation should keep in mind the issues of gender, culture, and class. Finally, if child welfare legislation is to be amended, child welfare needs the resources to respond to cases of domestic violence.

Magen (1999) agrees with Nixon’s first point, indicating that in order for child welfare to be more effective, there must be laws that permit battered women to use affirmative defence during child maltreatment proceedings. This would allow women to acknowledge the presence of domestic violence in the family home without concern for being blamed for not protecting the children. However Magen cautions that legislative changes that include witnessing domestic violence may do more harm than good, potentially leading to increased victimization of women by child welfare services. He argues that merely adding witnessing domestic violence to the legislation will not be effective, because many children witness domestic violence and demonstrate little or no evidence of experiencing child abuse. Furthermore, changing the legislation to include witnessing domestic violence as child abuse would lead to increased investigations of the ability of mothers to protect their children or, at the very least, lead to the situation of “don’t ask, don’t tell” (Magen, 1999).

The absence of inclusion of domestic violence as a protection concern is often cited by critics of child welfare as a serious issue (Nixon, 2001; Eichlin and Marshall, 1995; Magen, 1999). Nixon, Eichlin and Marshall, and Magen all state that child welfare ignores the severity of the issue of domestic violence and minimizes the impact of witnessing domestic violence on
children. Legislation itself can be considered as a barrier to best practice, because it fails to provide clear and succinct direction to social workers encountering families where violence is an issue. The project will explore whether or not social workers believe that the legislation clearly outlines their role in cases of domestic violence. In this manner, it is hoped to ascertain if they believe that the legislation is a barrier to best practice or not.
Family court system as a barrier to best practice

The family court system is the venue in which social workers can pursue protective intervention orders to ensure the safety of the children involved. The role of the family court system is to determine whether a child is in need of protection. In cases of domestic violence, social workers can apply for a court order. It is the role of the family court judge to determine whether there are reasonable grounds to believe that the children are at risk of being harmed, in which case a court order will ensure their safety. This project will explore the perceived effectiveness of the family court system with respect to cases of domestic violence, as well as the effect that it has on the practices of social workers.

In British Columbia, the family court system is only one of the courts that addresses the issue of domestic violence. The criminal court system also deals with the issue of domestic violence. The focus of this project will be the family court system and its affect on the child welfare response to cases of domestic violence.

The literature is critical of the manner in which the family court system is used in cases of domestic violence (Carter and Schechter, 1997; Magen, 1999). It suggests that family court orders obtained by social workers may reinforce the issue of mother-blaming. These orders often outline the expected behaviours of the offender and the non-offending parent, including participation in counselling or no contact orders. The primary focus of these orders remains the safety of the child. However, should the non-offending parent fail to follow through with the court order, she may be perceived as not protecting her child. In addition, should the male offender breach the court order, the child welfare response is based on the fact that the order was breached and not on who actually committed the offence. The child welfare decision to focus on the non-offending parent's ability to protect, holds her accountable for the male offenders behaviour and as such victimizes her. In this manner the use of the family court system has the
potential to create barriers to best practice in child welfare cases of domestic violence and to reproduce relations of power already impinging on the women involved.

Several authors have found that, while potentially effective, the family court system is seldom utilized by social workers in cases of domestic violence. Carter and Schechter (1997) acknowledge the importance of the courts and indicate that the courts can play a critical role in child welfare' ability to respond effectively to cases involving domestic violence. This could include creating orders that focus on the behaviour of the male offender and that establish his role in perpetrating child abuse. Carter and Schechter (1999) point out that the courts are often left out of the collaborative process. Shepard and Raschick (1999) also find that a very small percentage of investigated families deemed to be at a significant risk for domestic violence and child abuse come before the courts. This demonstrates the social workers’ decision not to use the courts as part of the intervention plan for families. Humphreys (1999), in reviewing court conference material, found that the issue of domestic violence was not acknowledged in the child welfare submissions despite evidence to the contrary. The literature suggests that the lack of appropriate court utilization is of such importance and is so conspicuously patterned that this may be an issue to explore for the South Fraser region.

The primary usefulness of the family court system as identified in the literature is to hold the male offender accountable (Carter and Schechter, 1997; Magen, 1999). Magen argues this point by stating that “workers should explore whether an order of protection against the batterer – as opposed to the removal of children – would significantly diminish the risk of harm to the children” (1999, p.133). Magen further states that this practice, while potentially effective, is not implemented by social workers in child welfare. Edleson and Beeman (2000) indicate that the courts are often influential in the direction of service to the most at-risk families and can order male offenders to enrol in rehabilitation programs.
The family court system has created a dilemma for social workers. Its purpose is to assist social workers in ensuring the safety of children. However, the literature has identified that the courts are left out of the collaborative process unless relevant legislation invokes their protective mandate and that when mandated, the gender-biased nature of the court system may reveal a misapprehension of the dynamics of domestic violence. As such, it has the potential to perpetuate the patriarchal nature of society by acting in an oppressive manner towards women. The literature also emphasizes the need for social workers to utilize the court system to hold offenders accountable and is critical of the absence of such a mandate in the practice of social work. The family court system, for all of its potential benefits to workers, thus has the potential to create barriers to best practice for social workers dealing with cases of domestic violence. The research project will explore the views of social workers on the family court system, including whether or not social workers believe that the family courts understand the issue of domestic violence as well as the perceived effectiveness of orders granted by the family court system.
Legislative “Failure to protect” clauses as a barrier to best practice

In British Columbia, the primary responsibility for ensuring the safety of the children resides with their parents. This is established within Section 2(b) and (c) of the Child, Family and Community Service Act (Ministry for Children and Families, 1999). In many cases of child abuse, child welfare authorities rely on at least one parent to act in a protective capacity. In many cases this parent is the female, non-offending parent. The expectation that women will take steps to protect their children from male perpetrators of violence can lead to the belief that women are somehow accountable for the behaviour of the male offender (Beeman et al., 1999). The actual terminology ‘Failure to Protect’ does not appear in the CF&CSA, however it is implied through the use of clauses that indicate that a parent is ‘unwilling’ or ‘unable’ to protect her children. Section 13(1)(h) of the CF&CSA states that a child needs protection “if the child’s parent is unable or unwilling to care for the child and has not made adequate provision for the child’s care” (Ministry for Children and Families, 1999, p. 15). A parent who is perceived as not protecting their children may be deemed to be unwilling to care for their children. The tendency to blame women for failing to protect their children has the potential to create a barrier to best practice in cases of domestic violence as it revictimizes the non-offending parent for the behaviours of the male offender.

Failure to protect is considered a form of neglect and is usually perceived as the unwillingness or inability of a parent to protect the child. In these situations, the mother is often identified as inadequate and is warned of her responsibility to protect her children, even though in some situations she may not even be able to protect herself. Callahan (1993) argues that this practice does not recognize the unequal power position of the non-offending parent. She further postulates that treating the mother is often considered easier than dealing with the offender and that this “fits” with the professional training of social workers. In cases of domestic violence, the
use of neglect or failure to protect clauses in the legislation reflects the limitations of the statutory mandate and subsequent practice. This may be dangerous for battered women, as they may not be willing to report domestic violence if they think that they will be held accountable and are at risk of losing their children (Magen, 1999). Magen (1999) believes that failure to protect may be misapplied and that the probability of a successful outcome may be low because many women may choose to remain in abusive relationships.

Several research studies have revealed that the practice of using failure to protect clauses in the legislation is widespread within the child welfare system. Beeman et al. (1999) found that social workers were holding women accountable for the safety of children and that mothers were expected to take steps to protect their children from violent offenders. A similar finding is suggested by the study conducted by Carter and Schechter (1997), who focused on the behaviour of child protection workers. They determined that social workers looked to the abused woman as the person responsible for stopping the abusers’ violent behaviour. When this expectation was not met, child protection officers forced the woman to leave or utilized failure to protect clauses to describe her behaviour (Carter and Schechter, 1997).

Theorists and researchers of this topic indicate that failure to protect is readily used despite its implications. Several of the practice guidelines reviewed as part of this the research study establish that failure to protect and neglect should not be utilized as a way to code parental behaviour in cases of domestic violence. The Santa Clara County Social Services best practice guidelines state that:

"3. The presence of family violence should not be used as the sole basis for a child’s removal from the home. Adult victims of family violence should be supported in their efforts to protect themselves and their children" (Santa Clara County Social Services Agency, 2000, p.2)
In addition, the following guidelines from the Santa Clara County Social Services Agency also establish that failure to protect is inappropriate and contrary to best practice:

“4. When there is family violence and it is determined that the non-offending parent is willing and capable of protecting the child, a safety plan must be developed with the adult victim and the child” (Santa Clara County Social Services Agency, 2000, p.2) and

“6. Where family violence has been identified but the child’s safety can be reasonably assured, the relationship between the non-offending parent and her child should be supported and preserved. The non-offending parent should be supported in her efforts to protect herself and her child.” (Santa Clara County Social Services Agency, 2000, p.3)

The National Association of Public Child Welfare Agencies has also established that utilizing failure to protect to describe the non-offending parent is inappropriate. Within their guidelines, three desired outcomes are identified and designed to avoid the use of failure to protect clauses when working with the non-offending parent. These three desired outcomes are taken from the practice guidelines and are as follows:

“2. The children will remain in the care of at least one non-offending parent who is safe or if this is not possible, with a safe, stable and consistent caretaker” (Foley et al., 1999, p.23) and

“3. Economic and emotional supports will be provided to the adult victim and children without opening a child protective services cases or without bringing them under the control of the juvenile court; particularly when other community services and alternatives can provide safety for the adult victim and child.” (Foley et al., 1999, p.23) and

“6. Adult victims will experience child protective services intervention in a manner that is non-blaming and supportive so that it enables them to voluntarily seek services and disclose information about the violence” (Foley et al., 1999, p.23)

Unfortunately, some agencies continue to perpetuate the oppressive attitude of child welfare policies towards women. The policy manual of the Durham Children’s Aid Society in Ontario states that in cases of domestic violence apprehension of the children will be considered
if “the victim refuses to take the children to the shelter or has an inadequate safety plan” (Durham Children’s Aid Society, 2002, p.14-03).

The use of failure to protect clauses is problematic in cases of domestic violence, as it detracts from the real concern, namely the violent behaviour of the male offender, and re-victimizes the non-offending parent. The current legislation in British Columbia does not acknowledge domestic violence as a child protection concern, rather it is child focused. If the child is not safe, it is likely that workers would look to the non-offending (female) parent to ensure the safety. If the non-offending woman does not take steps to ensure the safety of the child, then her behaviour may be described as ‘failing to protect’. The current research project will explore social worker beliefs about the issue and evaluate whether or not failure to protect is currently widely used and can be considered as a barrier to best practice. At the commencement of this project, I hypothesized that social workers would affirm the practice of assigning the label of failure to protect and that social workers would re-iterate that the focus of their interventions is often the non-offending parent.
Worker perception of domestic violence as a barrier to best practice

During the course of a protection investigation, social workers form opinions about specific situations and allegations of abuse. These subjective perceptions often influence the actions of the social worker. The literature argues that social workers do not perceive domestic violence prevention as part of their mandate, nor do they perceive witnessing domestic violence as part of their protective mandate in the absence of specific legislative guidelines. This significantly affects their work with families (Schechter and Edleson, 1997; Carter and Schechter, 1997; Shepard and Raschick, 1999). In addition, social workers’ actions demonstrate that domestic violence is not a priority of child welfare or that it is as serious as other forms of child abuse. The social workers’ perceptions of domestic violence cases can thus be considered as a barrier to best practice.

The literature on child welfare’s response to domestic violence has been critical of social worker’s practice and the lack of action in cases of domestic violence. Carter and Schechter (1997) argue that child welfare authorities have historically viewed the presence of domestic violence as a problem that is not consistent with the mandate of child protection. They claim that as a result of this perception, social workers do not routinely screen for domestic violence and do not properly identify domestic violence when it exists in families (Carter and Schechter, 1997). Shepard and Raschick (1999) studied the child welfare response to domestic violence and also found that workers do not view domestic violence as their area of concern. In their study, only 38% of cases workers directly asked the female client whether domestic violence had occurred (Shepard and Raschick, 1999). The authors of the study consider this percentage to be low and indicative of a practice that does not assess the existence of domestic violence. According to Shepard and Raschick (1999), not assessing for the presence of domestic violence is an indicator that the issue of domestic violence is not a priority within the child welfare system.
Humphreys (1999, 2000), studied the practices of social workers in cases where domestic violence was present and found that workers did not report domestic violence as an issue to be considered in court conferences. She indicates that the issue of domestic violence is sometimes recorded in the workers’ notes but not mentioned in the court setting, as social workers do not see domestic violence as relevant because it does not involve the children directly. Humphreys’ study also found that if domestic violence occurred, it was either referred to as fighting or marital discord or not mentioned at all, which minimizes the severity of the issue and serves as an indicator of the perceptions of social workers with respect to the relevance of domestic violence to their statutory mandate.

The perception that domestic violence is not serious and not a part of the child welfare mandate is consistent with Magen’s (1999) argument about of an institutionalized belief that the issue of domestic violence is not child welfare services’ concern. Therefore, social workers do not give domestic violence cases the same attention as other cases of child abuse.

The implication of the literature review is that families will receive inadequate service if social workers continue to perceive the issue of domestic violence as outside of their mandate. In addition, files that are investigated due to concerns of domestic violence are likely to be given low priority and not responded to within the same time frame that would be accorded other cases of child abuse.

The current research project will explore the social workers’ perception of domestic violence. This includes ascertaining the social workers’ level of agreement with the statement that cases of domestic violence are as serious as other child abuse cases and also determine the priority they assign to cases of domestic violence. In addition, the project will establish whether social workers believe that cases of domestic violence should be a part of the mandate of child
welfare services in British Columbia. In this manner, the study will explore social workers' level of concurrence with the literature.
Absence of community collaboration as a barrier to best practice

During the course of a child protection investigation, social workers may have the opportunity to liaise with other community professionals in order to obtain additional insights about the family and to assist in the case planning process. This collaboration can lead to more effective interventions as well as improved case planning and service delivery to families. Domestic violence cases are unique, as many cities and communities have developed specific services for battered women and usually have policies that law enforcement authorities and crown attorneys must follow. The absence of such collaboration invariably leads to inadequate service provision and can become a barrier to best practice (Aron and Olson, 1997; Beeman et al. 1999).

Several authors advocate for collaboration among community agencies in cases of domestic violence. Aron and Olson (1997) studied the responses of child welfare workers to domestic violence in five communities and found many examples of collaboration between child protection and other agencies. They indicate that this collaboration helped to shape the response to cases of domestic violence and led to a more focused intervention. Collaboration was viewed as an important aspect of service delivery and included collaboration with batterer intervention programs, battered women's services and other agencies involved with the family including the criminal justice system.

Beeman et al. (1999) also identifies community collaboration as one aspect of successful practice. She indicates that this process should include the sharing of information. Edleson and Beeman (2000) also found a need for “ongoing structures for communications and collaboration at the policy and direct service levels” (p.8). They indicate that once a case is open to child protection, there should be regular, on-going meetings between child protection staff and community-based agencies in order to monitor the progress of the family. In addition, Aron and
Olson (1997) state that collaboration with other community resources is essential to success in cases of domestic violence.

Collaboration is viewed as such an effective method of case work that several practice guidelines have specifically recommended this process as a standard that should be adhered to by all child welfare practitioners. The National Association of Public Child Welfare Agencies (NAPCWA) recommends that child welfare agencies build partnerships with community agencies in order to ensure that services are in place to reduce the risk to children (Foley et al., 1999). They also advocate for reduced communication barriers between agencies as well as increased collaborative case planning and intervention. The Santa Clara County Social Service Agency’s best practice guide states that social workers should collaborate with domestic violence advocates, offender treatment programs, health service providers and the criminal justice system (Santa Clara County Social Services Agency, 2002). The National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges Family Violence Department does not perceive child welfare to be in isolated issue. It states that “child protection services, domestic violence agencies, juvenile courts and neighborhood residents should provide leadership to bring communities together to collaborate for the safety, well-being and stability of children” (Schechter and Edleson, 1999, p.28). This perception of child welfare as part of a larger community response to domestic violence rather than an isolated component is a more integrated perspective and would lead to increased collaboration and improved service to families.

Community collaboration has the potential of improving service to families and reducing the risk to children. Unfortunately, the process of collaboration is often made difficult by the competing mandates of the agencies involved and poor working relationships. For example, the poor working relationship that exists between child protection and battered women's services is historical and is mostly due to diverging mandates. Aron and Olson (1997) found that there was
a history of hostility and antagonism between child protection and domestic violence advocates within many of the communities that they studied.

This poor working relationship often stems from the differences between the child-centered philosophy of child welfare services and the woman-centered philosophy of the battered women's movement (Beeman et al., 1999). The battered women's movement has historically focused on the safety of women, with the understanding that once women are safe, they will be able to ensure the safety of the children as well. Child welfare, as noted in the section on the theory of child welfare, focuses on the safety of the children. The poor relationship between these two fields has been created due to situations where child welfare workers may not believe that a mother is protective enough and that the safety of the children is compromised as a result. The battered women's movement, on the other hand, would argue that child welfare workers should focus on the safety of the mother, with the safety of the children occurring as a result. Each organization holds a different philosophy, which has led to an adversarial relationship between the two parties and which impedes any sort of collaborative effort. One possible solution to this dilemma is the development of a common language between child protection services and the battered women's services which would allow them to understand each other's role (Beeman et al., 1999).

The state of Michigan provides an excellent example of overcoming the barriers between child welfare services and battered women's advocates (Findlater and Kelly, 1999). Historically, in Michigan these two systems worked with families side by side, but were separate and distinct. Collaboration meant developing an understanding of each other's work, and as a result the safety of children was improved by enhancing the safety and self-sufficiency of mothers (Findlater and Kelly, 1999). The Michigan collaboration is also enhanced through the cooperation and support of the legislature, the governor, and the courts. Through co-location, cross-training, case
discussion, and amendments to legislation, Michigan created a model of collaboration between child welfare services and community resources that led to the improvement of services to families where domestic violence was an issue.

Collaboration with community agencies is an important aspect of case planning and service delivery. The absence of collaboration can lead to misunderstandings between community professionals and inadequate service provision. This paper will focus on this aspect as a possible barrier to practice in light of the implication that collaboration can have for the safety of the children. As part of this project, I expect that social workers will confirm the practice of collaboration and indicate that there remains an absence of resources for women and children who experience domestic violence.
Participants

The population of interest was child welfare workers employed by the Ministry of Children and Family Development in British Columbia. The population chosen for this project was 100 social workers employed in the South Fraser region. These social workers worked in positions that allowed them frequent involvement with cases of domestic violence. The workers were employed in child protection, family services, youth services, and intake. These employees were easily accessible to the researcher and, due to the standardized training of child welfare workers in British Columbia, were deemed to be representative of child welfare workers employed elsewhere in the province. Those workers who were not directly involved in the investigation and/or assessment of cases of domestic violence for protection concerns were not included in this study.
The survey was designed by the researcher to measure respondents' perceptions on eight identified areas of practice designated as potential barriers to best practice. The tool consisted of 27 questions based upon related literature, with space for additional comments at the end of the questionnaire (see Appendix A). Each of these questions asked for the respondent's level of agreement on one aspect of the eight themes. The survey tool utilized a five point Likert scale designed to measure the level of agreement. The scale went from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree," with an option for a neutral rating.

In addition to the Likert-scaled questions, the survey also included a demographic section to gather information about each respondent. This included gender, age, years of experience in child welfare field, job classification, and the level of training on the issue of domestic violence.

The research tool was pre-tested prior to conducting actual research in the South Fraser region. MSW students of the UBC School of Social Work were selected by the researcher to fill out the questionnaire and provide feedback for improvement. Each of these individuals had experience with the Ministry of Children and Family Development. However, none of them were employed in the South Fraser region at the time of their participation in the pre-test.

The questions on the research tool were phrased in both the affirmative and the negative in order to ensure that respondents would not provide 'patterned' answers. Prior to conducting the analysis of the data, the negatively worded questions were recoded into the affirmative to assist with the analysis. Where necessary, this is noted in the findings section.
Procedure

Permission was obtained from the Ministry for Children and Family Development to conduct this study in the South Fraser Region. Each of the community managers also provided approval at the local level. The community managers then communicated their support to the leaders of identified teams. The questionnaires were mailed to each of the respective team leaders in the South Fraser region. The team leaders were asked to distribute the questionnaires at their team meeting and to allow approximately 15 minutes for the respondents to fill out the survey. The surveys were then collected by the team leaders and returned to the researcher in self-addressed envelopes via the in-house mail system.

The data was analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, Version 11.0. The small number of surveys allowed for cross-tabulations and factor analysis. Cross-tabulation measures the relationship between two ordinal variables. For the crosstabulation, I utilized and present the results for Gamma ($\gamma$), the standard correlation co-efficient for ordinal measurement. Gamma is the primary measurement or level of association between two ordinal variables. The value of Gamma can range from $-1$ to $1$, which is the indication of the strength and direction of the relationship between the two variables.

Factor analysis is the statistical method that is used to reveal patterns of interrelationship among variables and for detecting clusters of variables that may be “intercorrelated and hence somewhat redundant” (Agresti and Finlay, 1997, p.630). The focus of the study was to identify specific themes in child welfare, and factor analysis was used to achieve this. Factor analysis explores the manner in which respondents answered the questionnaire and discerns any patterns that may exist in their answers. These patterns form individual factors from which new themes are inferred.
CHAPTER FOUR
FINDINGS

The section is structured along the eight themes identified in the literature. Also included in this section is the result of the factor analysis and the research findings.

Limitations of findings

The questionnaire provided me with limited data to analyze and, therefore, there are limitations to the findings. The first major limitation was the use of the data as ordinal as opposed to interval data. On occasion, researchers treat Likert-scaled data as interval data. However, given the exploratory nature of this study and the relatively low number of respondents, I chose to utilize the data as ordinal. The implication of this is that I utilized cross-tabulation as opposed to linear regression when analyzing my data, which reduced the number of findings of the study due to the inability to utilize linear regression.

The second limitation of this study is the number of respondents. I identified the population of interest as being 100 social workers in the South Fraser region. I received sixty-eight completed surveys. This is a small sample, and some cross-tabulations did not work due to the number of empty cells in the table. This also limited the findings of the study as an increased number of returned surveys would have increased the number of findings of this study.

Another limitation of this study is the actual composition of the sample with respect to gender. I was very interested in comparing the responses of male and female social workers on a variety of issues. However, only six male social workers responded to the survey, thereby limiting the type of analysis possible as crosstabulation between genders left too many empty cells and therefore could not be utilized within the findings.

The final limitation of this study is that respondents were not provided with a succinct definition of the term training. Training may have different meanings to different respondents
and the absence of a clear definition at the beginning of the survey has resulted in the inability to draw firm conclusions about this area. As such, when interpreting the findings of this study I am cautious about making generalizations about the issue of training and any findings associated with it.
Sample Description

The population of interest was 100 front line child welfare workers in the South Fraser Region. Out of 100 questionnaires sent out, 68 were returned. The following is a demographic description of the sample.

The largest group of respondents (47.1%) was between the ages of 26 and 35. The years of experience spread out fairly evenly among the respondents. Almost 50% of the workers had less than 5 years experience, while a combined 21% indicated that they had 6-10 years or more than 10 years experience working in the child welfare field. The gender division of the respondents was significantly uneven, with 58 women and 7 men responding to the survey.

The majority of respondents indicated that they had a Bachelor of Social Work degree (58%), 24% indicated that they had a Bachelor of Arts degree, 13% had a combined BA/BSW degree, 4% had a Master of Social Work degree, and 4% had another degree outside of those listed. The respondents appear to represent a cross-section of the front line staff as indicated by their current position. Of the respondents, intake workers comprised 19%, family service workers 42%, child protection workers 25%, and youth workers 12%.

The workers were asked to indicate what percentage of their caseload contains domestic violence cases. Sixty-five percent of the respondents indicated that domestic violence was an issue in 30% or less of their cases. It is interesting to note that 8 respondents (12%) indicated that over 50% of their caseload involved domestic violence. The respondents were also asked about their level of training on the issue of domestic violence. Responses to this question varied. Some workers had 1-2 hours of training (3%), 24% had a half-day of training, 16% had a full day of training, while 25% had more than one day of training (25%). The most interesting finding was that 30% of the respondents indicated that they had not attended any training on domestic
violence. Given that the absence of training was identified as one of the eight major themes affecting the child welfare response to domestic violence, this finding is significant to this study and will be explored further within the results section.

**Findings related to the demographics**

There were several findings from the research that are directly related to the demographic makeup of the respondents. The findings associated with the demographic appear to suggest that length of employment, years in child welfare and age, all have an impact upon the beliefs and possible practice of social workers.

The study found that younger workers are more likely to agree that male offenders receive enough attention, whereas older workers are likely to think that male offenders do not receive enough attention ($\hat{Y} = -0.40, p<.05, n = 63$).

Social workers with fewer years of experience in child welfare are more likely to agree that there are adequate resources for male offenders ($\hat{Y} = -0.394, p<.05, n = 54$). Younger social workers are also more likely to agree that there are adequate resources for male offenders ($\hat{Y} = -0.55, p<.05, n = 53$). These two findings indicate that young and inexperienced workers are more likely to believe that there are adequate resources for male offenders, while older, more experienced workers are unlikely to believe it.

Social workers with more years of experience in child welfare were found to be more likely to agree that social workers should focus on the mothers' ability to protect her children, not the male offender ($\hat{Y} = 0.29, p<.05, n = 65$).

An interesting finding was the correlation between years of employment and the perceived severity of domestic violence cases. Social workers who have been employed in child welfare for a long time are more likely to consider cases of domestic violence to be less serious than other cases of child abuse ($\hat{Y} = -0.290, p<.05, n = 63$).
The study also revealed that the higher percentage of a workers caseload that contains cases of domestic violence, the more likely they are to agree that it is the responsibility of social workers to assist women in leaving abusive situations ($\hat{Y} = 0.420$, $p < .05$, $n = 61$).
Adequacy of training as barrier to best practice

Training on domestic violence was evaluated in this study in two separate ways. In the demographic section of the survey 30% of the respondents indicated that they had received no training on the issue of domestic violence. In addition, respondents were asked whether if they felt that social workers received adequate training about domestic violence. When asked whether social workers receive adequate training about the issue of domestic violence respondents indicated that social workers in the South Fraser Region do not receive adequate training, with 53% of the respondents strongly disagreeing or disagreeing with the statement. Only 15% of the respondents agreed that social workers receive adequate training on the issue of domestic violence.

The perception of receiving adequate training was related to the belief that social workers utilize feminist theory. There was a low to moderate positive correlation between social workers reporting adequate training and social workers reporting that social workers use feminist theory indicating that social workers who feel that they receive adequate training are also likely to agree that social workers use feminist theory in assessing situations of domestic violence ($\bar{Y} = 0.4$, $p < 0.05$, $n = 45$).
Guiding principles as a barrier to best practice

Social workers were asked about the direct usage of feminist theory by child welfare workers in assessing situations of domestic violence. The responses to this question were very mixed. Thirty-three percent of respondents indicated “No opinion” on this question. Of those who responded to this question, 30% indicated a neutral response. The number of those who strongly disagreed (6%) or disagreed (13%) and those who agreed (12%) or strongly agreed (6%) was almost even.

The study explored the impact of the use of feminist theory on social work practice. Those social workers who utilize feminist theory also were more likely to routinely ask about domestic violence as part of their case practice ($\hat{Y} = 0.41, p<.05, n = 45$).

Social workers who agreed that feminist theory is utilized were found to be less likely to believe that it is the role of the mother to protect child from being harmed ($\hat{Y} = 0.58, p<.05, n = 45$). This means that social workers who agree that feminist theory is used also disagree that it is the role of the mother to protect her children.

The final area of the theoretical foundation of child welfare explored was the impact of feminist theory on social worker perception of domestic violence cases. Agreement on the use of feminism was found to be positively related to the perceptions that cases of domestic violence are as serious as other cases of child abuse ($\hat{Y} = 0.4, p<.05, n = 43$).

Finally, the study found that social workers who agreed that feminist theory is utilized were also likely to agree that there is a role for child protection services in cases of domestic violence ($\hat{Y} = 0.55, p<.05, n = 45$).
**Prevailing response to male offender as barrier to best practice**

The study explored the issue of male offenders in several ways. The first was to elicit workers’ opinion about whether male offenders receive enough attention during the course of child protection investigations. The majority of those who responded to this question, (63%) indicated that the male offender does not receive enough attention from child welfare authorities, while 25% indicated that adequate attention is paid. Although close to one-third (28%) indicated a neutral response.

The response to Question #10r indicates that social workers believe that the male offender does not receive adequate attention. I was interested in how this would affect the practice of social work. I found that those social workers who disagree that the male offender receives enough attention also agree that it is the role of the mother to protect the children from being harmed (Ŷ = -0.34, p< .05, n = 66).

The literature was critical of the child welfare involvement with the male offender, and I was interested to understand why this is the case. I hypothesized that one of the reasons for the absence of attention to the male offender may be the absence of adequate resources, which would dictate the practice of social workers. Of the respondents who answered this question, 85% either strongly disagreed or disagreed indicated that they did not feel that there are adequate treatment programs for male offenders. This sentiment was reflected in a comment made by one respondent, who indicated: “Victoria has an excellent family violence programme for men who have been violent, emotionally and verbally abusive or feel that they may do so. We need one in Fraser/Surrey region.” Another respondent made a request for “more services for men who have abused or are at risk.”

The research project explored whether social workers felt that there were resources available for men who had not been criminally charged. Close to 70% of the respondents who
answered this question disagreed or strongly disagreed that adequate resources for male offenders exist in the South Fraser Region.
Legislative barriers to best practice

The results indicated that the majority of workers (68%) disagreed that the CF&CSA clearly outlines the role for social workers in cases of domestic violence. One respondent wrote in the comment section “this issue should be addressed in Sec 13 of CF&CSA (as it is in some other provinces).” This finding suggests that social workers do not believe that the CF&CSA sets forth their role in cases of domestic violence.
Family court system as a barrier to best practice

The study explored was whether social workers believed that the family court system understands the issue of domestic violence. Thirty respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that the family court system understands the issue of domestic violence, while twenty respondents provided a neutral rating. It appears that social workers do not feel that the family court system understands the issue of domestic violence.

The absence of an understanding by the family court system seems to affect the focus of social workers when dealing with cases of domestic violence. The study found that there was a negative correlation between agreement that the family court system understands domestic violence and the belief that social workers should focus on the mother’s protective ability ($\hat{Y} = -0.40$, $p < .05$, $n = 59$). This means that social workers who believe that the family court system does not understand the issue of domestic violence are likely to agree that social workers should focus on the mother’s ability to protect.

The second area of the family court system that this study explored was the utilization of the family court to ensure the safety of children who have witnessed domestic violence. Social workers were asked for their level of agreement about the utilization of court orders to ensure the safety of children who witness domestic violence. The breakdown of responses was unclear for this question. The most common response was to disagree (30%), but 15 respondents (23%) remained neutral, while 18 respondents (28%) agreed with this question. This question appears to indicate that there is no consistent use of court orders as a means of protecting children who witness domestic violence.

The study found that social workers who are more likely to agree with the utilization of court orders are also more likely to agree that the role of the social worker is to protect children who witness domestic violence ($\hat{Y} = 0.282$, $p < .05$, $n = 66$). The protective role of social workers
appears to be consistent with the use of the family court system in cases of domestic violence. In this way, the court may be seen as validating the concerns and the protective role of social workers.

In my development of an understanding of the family court system as a potential barrier to best practice, I was interested to find out the perceived level of effectiveness of court orders in ensuring the safety of children in situations of domestic violence. Over 55% of the respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that “Court orders are effective in ensuring the safety of children.” However, the modal response was the neutral answer (31%). This indicates that the majority of respondents believe that court orders are not effective, although the modal response may be an indicator of a variety of experiences with court orders.
Utilization of ‘failure to protect’ as a barrier to best practice

As part of this study I wanted to ascertain the opinions of social workers about mothers in cases of domestic violence to see if the use of failure to protect is a barrier to best practice in the South Fraser region. Of the respondents who answered this question, 51% agreed or strongly agreed that in situations of domestic violence, child welfare believes that it is the role of the mother to protect the children from being harmed."

The central issue of the failure to protect label is that social workers erroneously focus on the mother’s ability to protect her children instead of the male offender’s behaviour. I wanted to ascertain whether social workers in the South Fraser held this belief, as suggested by the literature. In Question #9 respondents were asked: “In cases where domestic violence exists, social workers should focus on the mother’s ability to protect children as opposed to the male offenders behaviour.” While some respondents disagreed with this question (17% strongly disagreed and 20% disagreed), the modal response was neutral. This indicates that there is a degree of uncertainty about where the focus of the social worker should be during an investigation where domestic violence is a concern. The distribution of responses indicates that social workers may still utilize failure to protect with women who are victims of domestic violence.
Social workers' perception of domestic violence as a barrier to best practice

Virtually all of the respondents (91%) indicated that there is a role for child protection in families where domestic violence has occurred. In addition, over 75% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that cases of domestic violence are as serious as other cases of child abuse. Further along these lines eighty percent of the respondents indicated that cases of domestic violence should not be left solely to the police. Of the respondents, 80% agreed or strongly agreed that it is the responsibility of social workers in child welfare to assist women in leaving abusive relationships. Also 53% disagreed or strongly disagreed that social workers ask about domestic violence even when there is no evidence of its existence in the family setting.

Some of the most frequent criticisms of child welfare in literature are the treatment of women by social workers and the perceived lack of understanding of the situation of women in abusive relationships. I asked social workers about their perception of women in these situations in order to ascertain the accuracy of the assumptions as outlined in the literature. Over two-thirds (66%) disagreed or strongly disagreed that a woman who stays in an abusive relationship is only thinking of herself, not the children.

The study found that those social workers who agree that cases of domestic violence are as serious as other child abuse cases are more likely to disagree that women who stay in abusive relationships are thinking only of themselves ($\hat{Y} = -0.46, p < .01, n = 65$).
Lack of community collaboration as a barrier to best practice

Slightly more than one-third (36%) of the respondents indicated that social workers collaborate with community organizations in case of domestic violence when planning for the children. While 12 respondents (18%) disagreed, and 21 respondents (31%) indicated a neutral rating. Certainly these results do not confirm the general practice of collaboration.

Similarly, respondents provided a mixed response when asked about the practice of liaising with the police as 37% disagreed, 40% agreed, and 20% remained neutral. Again, while there is a small degree of agreement, the difference in answers indicates that there is no consistent practice among social workers with respect to liaising with the police. One respondent wrote: “Cooperation of police and services to battered women is sometimes minimal – nonexistent. Police are seen to ‘dump’ the problem on child welfare in situations where the offender is not charged.”

A tendency to work collaboratively with the police was also found to be related to the perceived role of social workers in cases of domestic violence ($\hat{\gamma} = -0.30$, $p<.05$, $n = 65$). Social workers who do not liaise with police are more likely to assist women with leaving abusive relationships. A possible explanation for the low levels of collaboration may be that about half of the respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that agencies that support battered women do not understand the role of child protection services.

The final area that the study explored was the adequacy of resources for women and children as perceived by social workers. I hypothesized that an absence of community resources will lead to an absence of collaboration with said resources and hence constitute a barrier to best practice. Of those who responded, 37% disagreed or strongly disagreed that there are adequate resources for women. However, the most frequently reported value was the neutral rating, chosen by 37% of the respondents. A more evident pattern was found when asked about the adequacy of
resources for children. In this case, 16 respondents (23%) strongly disagreed, 22 respondents (32%) disagreed, 19 respondents (27%) indicated a neutral rating, 9 respondents (13%) agreed and 1 respondent (1%) strongly agreed that there are adequate resources for children who witness violence.

I hypothesized that the perceived adequacy or inadequacy of resources for women and children would affect the response by social workers in these cases. Social workers who disagreed that there is a role for child protection services where domestic violence has occurred were also more likely to agree that there are adequate resources for battered women in the South Fraser region ($\hat{Y} = -0.36, p< .10, n = 67$). While this result is not generalizable to the population I include it because of the importance of the finding for this issue. I also surmise that a larger sample size may have created a situation whereby this finding would be statistically significant.
Expanding Upon Themes: Use of Factor Analysis

The researcher chose the eight themes identified in this project based on the literature review. In order to develop further understanding of the data, factor analysis was utilized. The data from the 68 respondents was utilized, and only factors with an Eigenvalue greater than one were selected. The factor analysis involved the use of the principle components analysis with varimax rotation in order to account for the maximum amount of variance. From the initial factor analysis, 10 factors emerged. Of these 10 factors, only 3 presented a valid theme to explore. The fact that so few themes emerged may be attributed in part to the exploratory nature of the study. Questions with an absolute factor loading of less than 50 were dropped from the factor.

The following are the 3 new factors identified:

Factor #1: Importance of legal intervention with the male offender (See Table 4.1)
Factor #2: Role Clarity (see Table 4.2)
Factor #3: Supporting the non-offending parent (see Table 4.3)

**Factor #1: Importance of legal intervention with the male offender**

In order to infer the meaning of Factor #1, I explored the questions associated with it and their relationship to one another. Question #10r, which is about the attention received by the male offender, had the highest loading or correlation with the factor. The other two questions that comprise this factor, Question #8r and Question #14, had to do with the family court system and the male offender as well. In addition, social workers that believe that cases of domestic violence are less difficult to assess if he has been charged are more likely to disagree that the family court system understands the issue of domestic violence ($\hat{Y} = -0.3$, $p < .05$, $n = 60$). Also, as part of the analysis, I found that those social workers who believe that the family court system understands the issue of domestic violence are likely to agree that the focus of investigations should be on the male offender. From these relationships and loadings, I inferred that this factor
was about the intervention with the male offender and that criminal charges and the family court system influenced this intervention.

More specifically, this factor suggests that social work intervention with the male offender is dependent upon a legal intervention. Legal intervention with the male offender that identifies the issue of domestic violence as being of concern, be it criminal or brought about by the family court system, validates social workers’ role with the family. Social workers appear to place a certain level of importance on the presence of a legal intervention with the male offender to validate their role with the family and, more specifically, with the male offender.

**Table 4.1: Factor #1 with loadings**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual Question</th>
<th>Factor Loading/Correlation co-efficient</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Question #10r. In cases of domestic violence, the male offender receives enough attention by child protection services.</td>
<td>0.790</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question #8r. Family court understands the issue of domestic violence.</td>
<td>0.605</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question #14. Cases where domestic violence has occurred are less difficult to assess if the male offender has been charged</td>
<td>-0.580</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Factor #2: Role Clarity**

The second factor was also comprised of three questions with factor loadings above .50. The highest loading was Question #17 which is a question about the clarity of the role of social workers and the legislation. This suggests that this factor is about the role of social workers in cases of domestic violence. The other two questions, Question #16 and Question #5, associated with this factor suggest this as well. With both of these questions, the role of the social worker changed when dealing with cases of domestic violence. Those social workers who believed that
situations of domestic violence should be left to the police agreed that social workers should assist women to leave abusive relationships, therefore acting in a more supportive manner towards women. Similarly, the presence of community resources shifts the role of social workers from that of protector to that of supporter to women and children. Given that the role of social workers changes depending upon the situation and the heavy loading of Question #17, I inferred that Factor #2 is about social workers desire for role clarity in cases of domestic violence.

Factor #2 suggests that social workers are seeking role clarity in cases of domestic violence. This clarity of direction is not ascribed to social workers within the CF&CSA. Police involvement often changes the role of social workers, while the presence or absence of resources for women further changes their role. As such, this factor highlights social workers’ desire for a more defined role in cases of domestic violence.

Table 4.2: Factor #2 with loadings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual Question</th>
<th>Factor Loading/Correlation co-efficient</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Question #17. The CF&amp;CSA clearly outlines the role for social workers in cases of domestic violence</td>
<td>0.715</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question #16. Situations of domestic violence should be left to the police</td>
<td>0.691</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question #5. Social workers collaborate with community organizations</td>
<td>0.508</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Factor #3: Supporting the non-offending parent

Factor #3 had three questions that loaded or correlated with it higher than .50. Question #2 loaded the highest, which initially suggested that this factor had to do with the role of training and social workers intervention with cases of domestic violence. Question #9 and Question #2 were found to be related as part of the analysis. Those social workers who believed that they received adequate training, disagreed that the focus of cases of domestic violence should be on
These social workers are more likely to act in a supportive manner towards battered women. The third question associated with this factor was Question #1r ‘There is a role for CPS where domestic violence has occurred’. The role of social workers appears to change depending upon the situation. Social workers can be either supportive or adhere to the child-focused mandate. Overall, this factor appears to acknowledge that social workers attempt to support the non-offending parent. Those with adequate training are likely to utilize a feminist perspective that would shift the focus of the investigation away from the non-offending parent. However, given the child-focused mandate of child welfare, this support may be tentative in nature.

This factor suggests that social workers support mothers in cases of domestic violence, but this support is conditional and dependent upon the mothers' ability to protect their children. Social workers felt that there was a role for them in these cases, but issues such as training and beliefs about the mother's ability to protect impinge on the quality of the interaction between the social worker and the mother. The child-focused legal mandate of child welfare services means that as long as the mother is protective of her children, social workers can be supportive. However, the situation may change if the mother acts in a manner that is perceived as non-protective. Therefore, the nature of the support is highly tentative.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4.3: Factor #3 with loadings</th>
<th>Individual Question</th>
<th>Factor Loading/Correlation co-efficient</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Question #2. Social workers receive adequate training about domestic violence</td>
<td>0.770</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question #9. Social workers should focus on the mothers ability to protect, not the male offender</td>
<td>0.596</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question #1r. There is a role for CPS where domestic violence has occurred</td>
<td>0.585</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER FIVE
DISCUSSION

This section presents a discussion of the findings of this project. The purpose of this section is to elaborate on the findings in an attempt to better understand the data. This section will also highlight areas of future research based on the current data and findings. The discussion is structured along the eight themes originally identified as barriers to best practice in cases involving domestic violence.

**Inadequate training as barrier to best practice**

The issue of training was raised by several authors in their criticism of the child welfare response to domestic violence (Aron and Olson, 1997; Carter and Schechter, 1997; Eichlin and Marshall, 1995). The main criticism of child welfare raised in the literature is that social workers do not receive enough training on the issue of domestic violence and as such are poorly prepared to deal with the complexity of the situation. This lack of preparation creates poor practice, as social workers are likely to adhere to the child-focused, protection-based mandate of child welfare services as opposed to engaging in practice that ensures the safety of women and children and holds the offender accountable. “Best practice” guidelines associated with this topic also clearly indicate that child welfare agencies should ensure that social workers receive adequate training on the issue of domestic violence (Foley et al., 1999; Santa Clara County Social Services Agency, 2002; Schechter and Edleson, 1999).

The data from the study revealed two important findings about the issue of training. First, that there is a large number of social workers in the South Fraser region who have not received training on domestic violence. Secondly, many social workers do not think that they receive adequate training on this issue. Both of these findings are consistent with the concerns raised in the literature that social workers are not adequately trained to deal with the issue of domestic
violence and that agencies do not provide enough training on this issue. The implication of these findings is that if social workers are not receiving adequate training, then it can be expected that their practice will not reflect the “best practice” standards as outlined in the literature. It is important to note that the current curriculum utilized by the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) is taught in one day, and it constitutes a sub-requirement that each new employee must complete prior to becoming a fully delegated child protection worker.

Ensuring adequate and appropriate training of social workers on the issue of domestic violence is also likely to mean improved practice that includes a feminist-based approach to these cases. The study found that social workers who agreed that they received adequate training also indicated a positive level of agreement that social workers utilize feminist theory in cases of domestic violence. The importance of feminist theory in practice will be explored in the section on theoretical foundations. This finding is consistent with Eichlin and Marshall’s (1995) position that any training on domestic violence must include a component on feminism and the abuse of women.
The guiding principles of child welfare as a barrier to best practice

The literature was critical of the child-focused nature of the child welfare system, as it fails to take into consideration the importance of the mother in a child's life (Aron and Olson, 1997; Beeman et al., 1999; Callahan, 1993; Humphreys, 1999). Separating the interests of the mother and the child, the literature argues, benefits neither the child nor the mother. Feminists have taken the philosophical approach and state that placing the child at the centre of focus is a fundamental flaw of the child welfare system. Several authors have also advocated for a change in the philosophical perspective utilized by child welfare workers and the child welfare system (Callahan, 1993; Swift, 1995; Eichlin and Marshall, 1995). These authors believe that the utilization of a feminist perspective would provide a more accurate assessment of domestic violence situations, as the assessment would be developed from the understanding of oppression and patriarchy. Making the woman the focus would invariably also put her children into the spotlight. The best practice guidelines reviewed in the literature also advocate for social worker practice that is indicative of the feminist perspective (Santa Clara County Social Services Agency, 2000; Foley et al., 1999). The study considers the absence of an appropriate theoretical focus or use of feminist theory in child welfare as a barrier to best practice in cases of domestic violence.

In the study, the respondents did not provide a uniform opinion of the use of feminist theory by social workers. This finding is not consistent with recommendations in the literature which indicate that social workers should be utilizing a feminist perspective and that child welfare services should incorporate the feminist perspective into the mandate (Callahan, 1993; Swift, 1995; Eichlin and Marshall, 1995). This finding is of interest, given the impact that feminist theory can have on case practice. There is a general sense of ambivalence in the data with respect to the use of feminist theory. One possible explanation for this ambivalence is that
feminist theory informs the practice of social workers, and this perspective is not supported by the current child welfare system. Social workers may well understand feminist theory and desire to practice according its principles, but the current child welfare system is narrowly focused on child safety as opposed to the interests of the mother. This creates a situation where social workers must practice according to standards that are set by the government and are different to those associated with feminist theory. I infer that this inability to utilize feminist theory surfaces as the ambivalence in response to questions about its utilization.

In addition to identifying the perceived use of feminist theory by social workers, the data gathered by this study provides insight into the perceptions and beliefs of social workers who utilize feminist theory in cases of domestic violence. The utilization of feminist theory in child welfare can change the manner in which domestic violence is perceived by social workers. The utilization of feminist theory coincides with the practice of routinely asking about the presence of domestic violence. Those social workers who perceive that they receive adequate training are more likely to believe in the use of feminist theory as part of their assessment of domestic violence. This translates into increased inquiry about domestic violence, demonstrating improved understanding of the complexities of domestic violence.

Feminist theory also informs the beliefs that social workers hold about cases of domestic violence. This means that those social workers who agree that feminist theory is utilized in child welfare, do not believe that it is the role of the mother to protect her children. This is consistent with the feminist perspective that advocates for holding the offender accountable and not placing the role of protection of the children solely on the victimized woman.

Finally, social workers who agree with the use of feminist theory also agree that cases of domestic violence are as serious as other types of child abuse investigations. Clearly, a feminist understanding of the dynamics of domestic violence can contribute to this understanding. This
includes the belief that children can be physically and emotionally harmed when they witness domestic violence and that substantive injuries can occur to the female victim (Appel and Holden, 1998).

Having stated that social workers who employ feminist theory are likely to perceive domestic violence cases to be as serious as other cases, and that they are more likely to disagree that it is solely the role of the mother to protect, there is still a related level of agreement between feminist theory and the social workers' conviction that there is a role for child welfare in cases of domestic violence. Social workers who agreed that feminist theory is utilized in practice are also likely to agree that there is a role for child protection in cases of domestic violence. Given the theoretical nature of the feminist perspective on domestic violence, it can be inferred that social workers would view their role as supportive towards women and children as opposed to the traditional protection-oriented role associated with child welfare services while engaging the offender in a more substantive role.

The sentiment amongst the respondents who utilize the feminist perspective is that there is a role for child protection in these cases because these cases are as serious as other cases of domestic violence. Those utilizing the feminist perspective approach domestic violence cases differently than they are assumed to in the literature. The feminist approach does not view the role of the mother as one of sole protector; rather, it appears that social workers are embracing the idea of supporting the mother and engaging with her to develop a safety plan, as opposed to forcing her to be protective under the threat of removal of her children. This approach to practice is more apt to be responsive to the needs of women and children and appears to be a more family-centered way of practicing child protection.

It appears that the philosophical foundations of child welfare are something with which the social workers of the South Fraser Region struggle. While there is evidence that social
workers adhere to feminist theory, there is some ambivalence about their ability to integrate it into child welfare services. This ambivalence is a clear indication that social workers have not reconciled their child-focused mandate with the family-centered practice advocated by feminists.
Avoiding the male offender as a barrier to best practice

Dealing with the male offender in cases of domestic violence is a topic given much attention in the literature. The criticism levelled at the child welfare system is that the perpetrators of violence are not held accountable for their actions and are not dealt with by child protection workers (Humphreys, 1999, 2000; Beeman et al., 1999; Carter and Schechter, 1997). Thus they avoid the scrutiny of the system, and the responsibility for the safety for the children is placed on the non-offending parent, usually the mother. The literature and best practice guidelines advocate for increased involvement with male offenders in order to promote accountability and child safety.

The concerns established in the literature about the male offender not receiving adequate treatment by child welfare appear to be warranted according to the data. Social workers' indication that they do not feel that the male offender receives adequate attention is consistent with the literature. This is a significant finding, as it has direct implications for the practice of social workers. If the male offender is not receiving adequate attention, than it is most likely that the focus of social workers is on the mother or non-offending parent, which perpetuates mother-blaming. Further exploration of this finding is needed due to the serious implications for practice associated with it.

It would appear that age and years of employment affect the beliefs of social workers about the treatment of male offenders. Younger workers are more likely to agree that male offenders receive enough attention, whereas older workers indicated that male offenders do not receive enough attention. This finding is likely due to the relative number of years of experience dealing with this population. It may also be the case that recent hires retain their educational training when first starting out in child welfare and endeavour to engage with male offenders as part of their case practice. Over time, this practice yields to the limitations of their mandate and
resources. Workers with more years of experience are more likely to indicate that there is not an adequate number of treatment programs for male offenders. This finding makes intuitive sense, as workers with more experience in child welfare will have had more experiences with resources and will have developed a better understanding of the adequacy or inadequacy of the number of programs for male offenders. The implication of this finding is that it emphasizes the importance of orienting new social workers to the child welfare system and the resources available to families in each community.

The belief that the male offender does not receive enough attention during child protection investigations has implications for the perceived role of the non-offending parent as well. The study found that those social workers who believe that male offenders do not receive enough attention are more likely to believe that it is the role of the mother to protect her children. This reinforces several stereotypes associated with the manner in which child welfare deals with domestic violence.

It would appear that social workers understand that male offenders do not receive enough attention from child welfare. One of the drawbacks of the quantitative methodology employed in this study is that it does not allow for the qualitative elaboration of the perceived reasons for this omission. One of the ways that the research attempted to illicit an opinion from the respondents was to ask them about the services available for male offenders within the South Fraser Region. The presence or absence of services may dictate the level of attention received by male offenders.

Social workers in the South Fraser region indicated that they believed that there was not an adequate number of treatment programs for male offenders, regardless of their legal situation. The absence of attention to male offenders may be due, in part, to the absence of resources within the community. If social workers are unable to provide service to this population, then it
may be the case that this population does not receive the attention that is warranted. Instead, as the study has shown, the protective nature of the non-offending parent remains the focus of child abuse investigations.

The respondents’ answers to the questions about male offenders appear to echo the themes found in the literature. The study revealed that the male offender continues to be avoided by child welfare authorities. There also appears to be a perceived inadequacy of resources for the offenders should they be engaged by a social worker. This creates barriers to best practice, as the study revealed that the absence of resources for male offenders results in social workers focusing on the non-offending parent and continuing to practice in an oppressive manner. The social workers in the Fraser region are practicing in a manner that is consistent with the literature and, therefore, are at risk to practice in an oppressive manner.
Child welfare legislation as a barrier to best practice

In British Columbia, the Child and Family Community Services Act (CF&CSA) mandates the roles and responsibilities of social workers in child welfare. The CF&CSA outlines the situations in which a child should be deemed in need of protection, the obligation of the Ministry of Children and Family Development in responding to concerns of child abuse, and the various responses or interventions that can be utilized in an investigation. These interventions vary from an offer of support services to a supervision order with the family or the removal of children from parental care. With respect to domestic violence, the CF&CSA does not have any provisions which establish that a child may be in need of protection if he or she witnesses domestic violence (Ministry of Children and Families, 1999).

Given the absence of any direct legislative acknowledgement of domestic violence as a child protection concern, this study explored the possibility that this is a barrier to best practice. Social workers clearly stated that they do not believe that the legislation that governs their work outlines their role in cases of domestic violence. The absence of this category from the CF&CSA legislation may be the primary reason why social workers hold this belief. The current method of practice within the Ministry of Child and Family Development is to code cases of domestic violence in relation to risk of physical harm, emotional harm, or parental inability or unwillingness to protect the children. None of these codes reflect the actual nature and complexity of domestic violence and, as such, the response by social workers is not likely to reflect best practice. While other studies have proven that children who witness abuse are likely to be physically harmed or to suffer emotionally (Appel and Holden, 1997; Edleson, 1995), labelling a parent as unable to protect perpetuates mother-blaming, which has been a long-standing criticism of child welfare services.
Establishing that witnessing domestic violence is a form of child abuse and a reasonable cause for intervention by child welfare authorities would provide social workers with a more definitive role. It is also important to note that any categorization of witnessing domestic violence as child abuse must occur with a simultaneous change in practice that places more emphasis on the male offender and his accountability for potential harm to the child. Only specific changes in legislation can mandate a more effective child welfare response to domestic violence.
The family court system as a barrier to best practice

The use of the family court system was identified in the literature as a potential barrier to best practice in cases of domestic violence. The Child, Family and Community Service Act enables social workers to seek protection orders to ensure the safety and well-being of children. To seek an order, social workers must utilize the family court system. These protection orders can vary from a supervision order to a restraining order against the male offender or the removal of the children from parental care. In cases of domestic violence, obtaining a protective intervention order requires the judge to have an educated understanding of the issues associated with domestic violence. If a family court judge does not understand the complexities of domestic violence, then it is unlikely that the family court system is going to assist the social worker in ensuring the safety of the children. In addition, a further barrier to best practice may be the ineffectiveness of the order itself. The study explored these issues as they relate to barriers for social workers involved in cases of domestic violence.

The study explored whether social workers perceived that the family court system understands the issue of domestic violence. Most social workers in this study do not believe that the family court system has an adequate understanding of the issues associated with cases of domestic violence, while a large number of social workers are uncertain of the court’s understanding. This finding is consistent with the literature, which suggests that education about the issue of domestic violence must include the court system in order to ensure a consistent response (Magen, 1999). The court system is also one of the pillars of the patriarchal society that oppresses women through its actions and decisions. Additional training of court staff and judges as well as the inclusion of judges in community advisory boards would thus significantly improve the response to domestic violence.
In addition to the general viewpoint that social workers do not believe that the family court system understands the issue of domestic violence, the study revealed that this absence of understanding has implications for best practice. If the courts are perceived as aware of the issue of domestic violence, social workers are more likely to perceive the courts in a positive manner. Those social workers who do not perceive the family court system as understanding the issue of domestic violence will focus their efforts on ensuring that the mother is able to protect the children. Social workers appear to place importance on the family court system as a supporter of their practice.

If social workers do not believe that the family court system understands the issue of domestic violence, it is unlikely that they will utilize it as an instrument to ensure the safety of the children. The social workers in this study indicated that in the absence of a family court system that understands domestic violence, they have no choice but to focus on the protective ability of the mother, regardless of the consequences of the failure of her efforts. The family court system is thus a barrier to best practice for social workers, as it has the potential to perpetuate the re-victimization of female victims of domestic violence.

Social workers were unclear whether the courts were regularly utilized to ensure the safety of children who witnessed domestic violence. This lack of clarity may be indicative of inconsistent practice amongst social workers and warrants further exploration. Social workers who indicated that they utilized court orders also indicated that they felt that their role was to protect the children who witness domestic violence. This means that social workers are placing a certain level of importance on court orders to validate their role as protectors and interveners. This finding is consistent with the finding that social workers do not believe that the family court system understands the issue of domestic violence. If there were a consistent response from the court system, it is likely that more social workers would state that the court system understands
domestic violence. They would therefore pursue court orders more consistently as a means of protecting the children.

The failure to utilize court orders may be due to their perceived ineffectiveness. Social workers do not believe that court orders are effective, but many respondents indicated a neutral rating, which might be the result of mixed experiences with court orders. Often the court orders will stipulate no contact between the male offender and the family. However, this is difficult to monitor. Even when social workers suspect that the order is being violated, in the absence of concrete proof they may be ambivalent about the effectiveness of the order.

Social workers in the South Fraser Region indicated that the family court system is a barrier to best practice in cases of domestic violence. There is a belief that the family courts do not understand the issue of domestic violence, and that social workers appear reluctant to utilize court orders to protect children. This reluctance may stem from the belief that court orders are not effective in keeping children safe. However, there continues to be some ambivalence as evidenced by the high number of neutral responses to the questions. These findings are consistent with the literature. Carter and Schechter (1997) identify the importance of the court system as an effective method for dealing with cases of domestic violence. However, they indicate that it is important to educate those within the court system in order to improve its effectiveness. The failure of social workers to utilize court orders is consistent with the other findings which state that social workers should utilize the family court system more than they do at the moment (Magen, 1999, Shepard and Raschick, 1999).
Utilization of “failure to protect” as a barrier to best practice

“Failure to protect” is a category associated with parental omission (Beeman et al., 1999). This term is often used in situations of domestic violence where the female victim does not leave the home, with her children continuing to witness violence and possibly risking harm. Historically, child protection services have claimed failure to protect as grounds for intervention and/or removal of the children from their mother’s care (Callahan, 1993; Featherstone and Trinder, 1999). The consistent use of failure to protect was established as a barrier to best practice, because its use is seen as a way of continuing the oppressive patterns of interaction with female victims of domestic violence.

Social workers indicated that they believed that the non-offending victim should protect the children from harm. This finding is consistent with the literature, which states that child welfare services expect the non-offending parent to be protective of the children (Beeman et al., 1999; Carter and Schechter, 1997). By implication, should the children be harmed, it is likely that the mother will be assumed to have failed to protect them. This shifts the responsibility from the offender to the victim.

Protecting her children requires the woman to be able to protect herself while in an abusive relationship. Those who agree that it is the role of the mother to protect her children also agree that the male offender does not receive enough attention by child welfare authorities. It appears that the focus on the mother’s success or failure to protect creates an identity for the mother, one of protector and caregiver, while the male offender is avoided and is “filtered out” of child protection investigations (Buckley, 1998).

The use of failure to protect by social workers in cases of domestic violence should be reduced, thereby improving social work practice. It appears that the utilization of feminist theory, and length of employment can all influence the use of failure to protect clauses in legislation.
The use of feminist theory also appears to be a factor in reducing the practice of using failure to protect. As mentioned in the section on the theoretical foundation of child welfare, social workers who utilize feminist theory are less likely to agree that it is the role of the mother to protect her children. In this way, feminist theory provides a framework to analyze situations of domestic violence and provides social workers with the opportunity to shift from the practice of mother-blaming to one of accountability for male offenders.

Social workers with more years of experience in child welfare are more likely to agree that social workers should focus on the mothers’ ability to protect, not the male offender. It appears that the practice of experienced workers has been shaped by the mandate of child welfare, which is narrowly child-centred. The consequence of this is the focus on the mother’s ability to protect as opposed to the engagement of the male offender in the case-planning process. These social workers appear to continue to be at risk of using failure to protect to define the behaviour of the non-offending parent.

It is possible that social workers adhere to the mandate in order to have some direction in cases of domestic violence. Almost 70% of the respondents felt that the CF&CSA does not clearly outline the role of social workers in cases of domestic violence. Social workers with many years of experience may have experienced a sense of futility in working with male offenders without a clear mandate and subsequently find focusing on the mothers less draining and less complicated.

Social workers in the South Fraser Region continue to utilize failure to protect in cases of domestic violence. Social workers may want to intervene in these cases in a different manner but are most likely constrained by the mandate set forth in the legislation. There appears to be some ambivalence among the respondents about where the focus of child welfare should be in cases of domestic violence. This may also be the expression of role ambiguity caused by the absence of
any clear direction provided by the CF&CSA. The institutional proclivity to focus on the mothers’ inability to protect is a potential barrier to best practice in the South Fraser Region.
Social workers' perception of domestic violence as a barrier to best practice

The perceived absence of an appropriate response by child welfare workers to cases of domestic violence as noted in the literature, may be the result of social workers' perceptions of these cases. Several authors outlined their belief that social workers perceive cases of domestic violence as outside of the child welfare mandate (Carter and Schechter, 1997) or as irrelevant to the focus of child protection (Humphreys, 2000). Magen (1999) expresses a concern that social workers' perception of domestic violence often leads to substantiation of a concern of neglect against the non-offending parent.

An overwhelming majority of social workers in the study perceived cases of domestic violence to be within their mandate and to be just as serious as other cases of child abuse. They also indicated that these cases should not be left solely to the police. This finding is contrary to the literature that expresses concern over the social workers' perceptions of and attitudes towards cases of domestic violence. Social workers in the South Fraser region are an example of child welfare workers who understand their mandate and the fact that cases of domestic violence may require child protection.

An exploration of the social workers' perception of the severity of domestic violence cases reveals that as the years of work experience increase, the belief that cases of domestic violence are as serious as other child abuse cases decreases. This is an interesting finding, because it suggests that as workers gain experience, they perceive cases of domestic violence to be not as serious as other cases of child abuse. This is likely to create a barrier to best practice, as domestic violence cases may not receive the same attention as other cases of child abuse.

The study also explored the practice of social workers in cases of domestic violence as a way of identifying their perceptions of this issue. If the perception of social workers is that cases of domestic violence are not important or even part of their mandate, this sentiment would be
reflected in their practice. Several authors and best practice guides indicate that one of the most important aspects of domestic violence cases is the process of regular screening for its presence. This increases the likelihood that situations of domestic violence are addressed as part of a coherent and comprehensive response (Magen, 1999; Carter and Schechter, 1997; Shepard and Raschick, 1999). This research project found that social workers do not routinely screen for domestic violence. This finding is contrary to the recommended practices as reviewed in the literature on this theme. This means that the fundamental practice of social workers is inadequately addressing the issue of domestic violence. The absence of consistent screening means that situations of domestic violence may go unnoticed and that families will be unsupported if there is violence in the home.

Social workers in the South Fraser region clearly see their role as one of support to women in situations of domestic violence. The belief that social workers should assist women in leaving abusive situations signifies a shift from the role of social worker as protectors of children to social workers as supporters of both women and children. Social workers perceive that their role in cases of domestic violence goes beyond the role of child protection and includes victim support. This may also reflect the social workers’ understanding of the importance of ensuring the mother’s safety as a means of ensuring the safety of the children. In fact, social workers whose caseloads contain a high percentage of domestic violence cases are more likely to perceive their role as assisting women in leaving abusive relationships. This may be the result of having to deal with numerous cases and finding practice methods that are more effective in ensuring the safety of the children. In addition, the findings indicate that there may also be some recognition by social workers that the best way to ensure the safety of the children is to ensure the safety of their mother.
The final area of perception explored in the current research was the workers' perception of the mother. The literature suggests that workers often blame mothers for not protecting the children and may expect mothers to leave abusive relationships. The data of the study suggests that respondents may have some insight into the complexities of women's decision to stay in abusive relationships. The fact that social workers have this understanding does not reduce the perceived severity of these cases. Those who disagree with the fact that a woman who stays in an abusive relationship is thinking of herself agreed that cases of domestic violence are as serious as other cases of child abuse. Those who agreed that cases of domestic violence are as serious as other cases of child abuse disagreed that child welfare should focus solely on the mother and not on the male offender as well. Furthermore, those who agree that cases of domestic violence are as serious as other cases of child abuse also agree that social workers use feminist theory when assessing cases of domestic violence.

There appears to be a common theme that characterises the perceptions of social workers involved in cases of domestic violence. It appears that social workers are demonstrating their understanding of the complexity of these situations. It is also clear that the desired manner of practice by these social workers is one in which they engage with the mother and assist her in ensuring the safety of the children. The study indicates that social workers are endeavouring to engage with the mother and move away from mother-blaming. It would appear that workers perceive mothers as a valuable resource and that their preferred practice is to ensure the safety of the mother and consequently the safety of the children.
Lack of community collaboration as a barrier to best practice

One of the most prominent themes in the literature is the issue of community collaboration by child welfare authorities. In cases of domestic violence, the literature suggests that social workers liaise with other community professionals in order to provide the best possible service to families (Aron and Olson, 1997; Beeman et al., 1999, Carter and Schechter, 1997; Findlater and Kelly, 1999). The literature emphasises the need to develop a community-based response to domestic violence. The literature is critical of non-collaboration and the practice of making decisions for families without consulting with other service providers who may be able to offer additional support to the family and the social worker.

The study did not find consistent evidence that community collaboration is practiced in the South Fraser region. This may mean that social workers function in relative isolation when dealing with cases of domestic violence. This finding is contrary to the recommendations in the literature which suggest that best practice in cases of domestic violence includes collaboration with community resources. Given the relative importance of improving service, future exploration of this subject is warranted.

Failure to collaborate with the police was also identified by the study as a specific example of the absence of collaboration among social workers. This may be due to the divergent mandates of the police and child welfare. Child welfare and the police have separate legal mandates, and child welfare does not require that the police charge a man with domestic assault in order to intervene in the family. As such, social workers may not feel the need to collaborate with the police during an investigation. Another reason for this lack of collaboration may be the fact that in order for the police to become involved, the woman is required to report an assault by her partner. Many women are reluctant to report the abuse. Therefore, the police do not become involved with the family and collaboration does not occur.
A tendency to work collaboratively with the police was also found to be related to the perceived role of social workers in cases of domestic violence. In the absence of any criminal intervention, the role of the social worker, according to the respondents, should be to assist women in leaving the abusive relationship. While the importance of collaboration should not be ignored, this finding is indicative of a manner of working with abused women that is contrary to what is typically reported in the literature. This finding indicates that social workers appear to understand the need to work with abused mothers in order to ensure the safety of the children as opposed to simply relegating them to the role of protectors.

The historical division between child welfare and the battered women’s movement is contrary to the ethic of community collaboration. The relationship between these two fields has been tenuous at best, and the literature describes several examples where, due to different mandates, child welfare services and other agencies that support battered women often come into conflict with one another (Edleson and Beeman, 2000). Social workers must often work with women’s shelters as part of the investigative process and assessment of the safety of the children. Given the historical division between these two services, the study explored this relationship as a potential barrier to best practice.

The final area that the study explored was the adequacy of resources for women and children as perceived by social workers. If social workers are going to utilize community resources, these resources must exist within the community. The findings indicate that there is a belief among social workers that there are not enough resources for battered women and children who witness violence. However, the high number of neutral responses indicates that social workers are unsure of the adequacy of the resources for battered women. This indicates that there may be a need to educate workers about the resources that are available to women and children in the South Fraser Region.
Social workers who believe that there are adequate resources for women are also likely to indicate that there is no child protection role in cases where domestic violence is an issue. There may well be a supportive role for social workers, however this study focused on the protective role of child welfare in these cases. This has implications for the role of social workers in communities where there are adequate resources for women. In communities with adequate resources, the role of the social worker appears to change from that of protector to that of a supporter for women and children. Adequate resources may minimize protection concerns to such an extent that social workers will not think that there is a role for child welfare services. It appears that resources for women provide a level of inherent protection for children as well, which reduces the protective role of social workers. It is possible that this is due to the safe nature of many shelters and the abilities of the trained staff who are mandated to report any children who they believe may be in need of protection. Hence, these resources are an extension of the protection offered by society for women and children, and their very presence in a community reduces the role of child protection services in cases of domestic violence.

Community collaboration is the key to the best practice standards identified in the literature. It would appear that social workers in the South Fraser Region believe that they are engaging in the practice of collaborating with community agencies on a fairly regular basis. The respondents also felt that battered women’s services understand the role of child protection, which is likely to enhance any relationship between these two organizations. However, with respect to the South Fraser Region, it would appear that social workers do not feel that adequate resources exist for women and children at this time. In addition, it appears that many social workers are unsure if the resources for women are adequate. This has the potential to be a barrier to best practice.
Going beyond the eight themes: A discussion of a new approach to domestic violence

Factor analysis has provided additional insight into the current struggles of child welfare social workers in dealing with cases of domestic violence. In addition to the eight themes identified by the researcher, factor analysis identified 3 latent factors. Each of these new factors identified another important aspect of child welfare practice in cases of domestic violence.

The first factor highlights the importance of a legal intervention with the male offender. For social workers, their involvement with the male offender appears to be contingent on a legal intervention. It also appears that the legal identification of domestic violence gives social workers the leverage to engage with the male offender. It is also plausible that criminal charges or family court orders create a public atmosphere in which to discuss the violence. This does not permit the offender to deny the situation. One of the first eight themes indicates that social workers do not pay attention to the male offender. This new factor provides insight into the manner in which social workers can begin to change their case practice. The utilization of court orders may also increase the social workers’ ability to engage with the male offender, thereby improving case practice.

The second factor indicates that social workers seek role clarity in cases of domestic violence. Social workers established that their role with families varied depending on several external factors. One way to improve role clarity may be to include witnessing domestic violence as part of the protection mandate of the CF&CSA. The other way to reduce role ambiguity appears to be through ongoing communication with the police and community resources. Given that community collaboration was identified as one of the first eight themes, this makes intuitive sense.
The final factor is the support for the non-offending parent. Workers appear to be attempting to redefine their role in battered women's lives. The social workers in this study indicated that they were attempting to be more supportive to battered women. However, given the legal mandate of child welfare services, this support is tentative and based upon the mothers' ability to protect the children. The limitations of the legal mandate provided by the CF&CSA conflicts with the child welfare workers' desire to support battered women. Child welfare services' continuing separation of the interests of the mother and her children is problematic, as it forces social workers to choose between ethical practice and child safety.
CHAPTER SIX
CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research project set out to explore the views of social workers employed by the Ministry for Children and Family Development in cases of domestic violence. It also aimed to ascertain how those views compare with the literature and best practice standards. The literature has been critical of child welfare social workers' practice in these cases. Of the eight themes identified in the literature, social workers agreed with six: that there is not adequate training, that male offenders do not receive adequate attention, that the legislation does not consider domestic violence to be a child welfare matter, that the family court system does not understand domestic violence, and that community collaboration is not a regular practice. Social workers did not agree with the literature on two themes. Namely, social workers perceived domestic violence to be within their mandate, contrary to the literature, and social workers were unclear about the use of the feminist theoretical background in their practice, which is also a contrary to the literature and best practice guidelines.

In addition to the exploration of the eight themes, the study revealed other themes through the use of factor analysis. These three new factors suggest that social workers in the South Fraser region are approaching cases of domestic violence in a more supportive manner than before, which has implications both for their practice and for the women who are victims of violence. These new factors were encouraging, as they established that social workers are moving beyond the stereotypes associated with the child welfare profession.

Based on the findings and discussion of the study, the following recommendations for improvement of the child welfare response to cases of domestic violence can be made.

Recommendation 1. The provincial government of British Columbia shall add witnessing domestic violence to Section 13 of the Child, Family and Community Service Act.
One of the most recurring themes throughout the research project was the impact of the child welfare mandate on the workers' ability to practice in an anti-oppressive manner. Child welfare social workers in British Columbia currently intervene in cases of domestic violence with no clear mandate to do so. This appears to lead to role ambiguity for them, creating concerns about the manner in which these cases are handled.

The addition of witnessing domestic violence to Section 13 of the CF&CSA would create a legislative mandate for social workers. The identification of a child in need of protection as a result of witnessing domestic violence will reduce the role ambiguity of the workers.

In recommending that witnessing domestic violence be added to Section 13 of the CF&CSA, I note that there are inherent risks associated with this recommendation. Adding witnessing domestic violence to the legislation may have the opposite effect of what is intended. Many more women may become the focus of child welfare investigations and subsequently there is a risk that women will stop reporting the occurrence of domestic violence for fear of being subjected to an investigation. However, the risk of this occurring can be minimized through adequate training on this issue and through the development of practice guidelines for social workers.

**Recommendation 2. The provincial government of British Columbia shall add domestic violence to the current risk assessment model.**

The second way of accurately defining the role of social workers in these cases is to add the occurrence of domestic violence to the current risk assessment model. The identification of domestic violence as the primary issue within the family at the assessment stage will result in clarity of the social worker's role with the family. Specifying that domestic violence is one of the primary issues of concern will also assist social workers in developing their role with the family, whether it is one of support for the mothers or of holding offenders accountable for their actions.
Recommendation 3. The Ministry of Children and Family Development, Fraser Region, shall develop and implement best practice guidelines for dealing with cases of domestic violence.

The current research project identified that the practice of social workers in the south Fraser region were not consistent with those as reviewed in the literature. Further exploration revealed that there are no current domestic violence practice guidelines available to social workers in this region. As such, the third recommendation is for the development of practice guidelines for social workers when dealing with cases of domestic violence. The Fraser Region should develop practice guidelines that assist social workers in dealing with these cases. These guidelines should outline the specific steps deemed acceptable for these cases, provide an acceptable theoretical framework, and highlight the importance of understanding the gendered nature of domestic violence. Specifically, as highlighted in this research project and in the literature, the guidelines should include direction for social workers to intervene with the male offender in order to assess his propensity to re-offend. These guidelines should also provide direction to social workers as to the appropriate manner in which to work with the female victim. These guidelines would guide the practice of social workers in these cases and therefore reduce the risk of continued focus upon women as part of the investigative process.

Given the wide-ranging nature of these cases, the practice guidelines should also include a spectrum of intervention for the benefit of the social workers. This spectrum shall outline the varying degrees of intervention available to social workers from the least intrusive measure (family support) to more intrusive measures (removal of the child from parental care). Finally, these guidelines shall incorporate the notion of the benefit of differential response, or the family development response, as it is referred to in British Columbia. This allows the worker to engage with families in a more supportive manner as opposed to the current protection-oriented role.
Recommendation 4. It is recommended that MCFD – Fraser Region develop and implement domestic violence training for front line staff. This training should be a minimum of one day in length and should contain a component on feminist theory and the gendered nature of domestic violence.

Training is one of the ways in which any change in legislation can be operationalized with staff in order to ensure cases of domestic violence are handled in an anti-oppressive manner. Training is an opportunity to educate staff on the gendered nature of domestic violence, introduce the feminist perspective associated with this issue and provide them with concrete examples that allow them to incorporate the best practice guidelines and legislative requirements into their daily practice. In this manner, training staff will partially offset the risks associated with the addition of witnessing domestic violence to Section 13 of the CF&CSA.

Recommendation 5. It is recommended that MCFD – Fraser Region develop or participate in the development of a community response to the issue of domestic violence. This could include a regional committee comprised of various community members. This committee could assist in training MCFD staff and increase collaboration in the Fraser Region. All staff should be regularly apprised of the status of this committee and any associated projects.

Any effective response to domestic violence must include other community agencies or community members. This could include the police, battered women’s services, counsellors and any other service provider that deals with this issue. A co-ordinated community response may result in the development of community-based practice standards and will result in a more uniform response to this issue. This community response may also be a mechanism to ensure that social workers adhere to anti-oppressive practice as part of their casework.

While there remain many criticisms of social work practice in child welfare, this study found that many of the problems stem from the systemic problems associated with child welfare services. The absence of adequate resources and training as well as poorly defined legislation are all systemic impediments to best practice. The recommendations of this study are intended to redress some of these barriers to best practice.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A
QUESTIONNAIRE
Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements as they relate to child welfare and domestic violence. For the purposes of this study, domestic violence is defined as an act of violence by one adult towards another adult.

(1 = Strongly Disagree and 5 = Strongly Agree, 0 = No opinion)

Please provide only one response to each question.

1. In families where domestic violence has occurred there is no role for child protection services.

2. Social workers receive adequate training about the issue of domestic violence.

3. In the South Fraser region, there are adequate resources for battered women.

4. In the South Fraser region, there are adequate resources for children who witness violence.

5. When investigating situations of domestic violence, social workers collaborate with community organizations when planning for the children.

6. In assessing situations of domestic violence social workers do not utilize feminist theory.

7. In situations of domestic violence, child welfare believes that it is the role of the mother to protect children from being harmed.

8. The Family Court system does not understand the complexities involved in cases where domestic violence is an issue.

9. In cases where domestic violence exists, social workers should focus on the mother’s ability to protect the children as opposed to the male offender’s behaviour.
10. In cases where domestic violence exists, the male offender does not receive enough attention by child welfare authorities.

11. In cases where domestic violence exists, social workers liaise with the police on a consistent basis.

13. Social workers routinely ask about domestic violence, even when there is no evidence of its existence in the family setting.

14. There are not adequate treatment programs for male offenders in the South Fraser Region.

15. Cases where domestic violence has occurred are less difficult for social workers to assess if the male offender has been criminally charged.

16. Removing children when the mother is a victim of domestic violence revictimizes the mother.

17. Situations of domestic violence should be left to the police to investigate.

18. The Child, Family and Community Service Act clearly outlines the role for social workers with families where domestic violence has occurred.

19. Child protection court orders (ie: supervision orders) are not effective in ensuring the safety of children who have witnessed domestic violence.

20. Removing children from a mother who is a victim of domestic violence, does not benefit the child.

21. The role of child welfare should be to protect children who have witnessed domestic violence.
22. Investigations that only involve domestic violence are not as serious as other types of child abuse investigations.

23. Social workers utilize court orders to ensure the safety and well-being of children who witness domestic violence.

24. A woman who stays in an abusive relationship is only thinking of herself, not her children.

25. It is not the responsibility of social workers in child welfare to assist women in leaving abusive relationships.

26. Agencies that support battered women do not understand the role of child protection services.

27. Child welfare authorities and agencies that support battered women should have similar mandates.

28. Services are not available for men who have abused their partner, but have not been criminally charged.

Please use the following space for any additional comments that you may have about this topic.

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

Thank you for taking the time to fill out this questionnaire. Your participation is greatly appreciated.

Please respond to the following as they pertain to you.
1. What is your educational qualification?
   _BA _BSW _MSW _DSW _other: please specify________

2. What is the length of time that you have been employed in the field of child welfare (including employment outside of British Columbia)?
   ___ Less than one year
   ____ 1-2 years
   ____ 3-5 years
   ____ 6-10 years
   ____ More than 10 years

3. What is your current position within the Ministry of Children and Family Development?
   ___ Intake ___ Family Services ___ Child Protection ___ Youth Services
   ___ Other: Please specify________

4. What percentage of your caseload would you estimate contains files where domestic violence is an issue?
   ___ Less than 10%
   ____ 11-20%
   ____ 21-30%
   ____ 31-40%
   ____ 41-50%
   ____ Greater than 50%

5. If you have received formal training about domestic violence, how much time was allotted to this training?
   ___ 1-2 hours ___ Half day ___ Full Day ___ More than one day
   ____ No Training

6. If you have received formal training about domestic violence, what was the primary reason for taking it?
   ___ Part of Educational requirements ___ Required as part of employment
   ___ Personal interest ___ Other reason: Please specify________

7. What is your gender?
   ____ male  ____ female

8. Please indicate your age?
   ___ under 25  ____ 26 to 35  ____ 36 to 45  ____ 46 to 55
   ____ 56 to 65