

Rooted in Practice: Reimagining Healing through Anti-Oppression and Embodied Practice

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Project Background

Disclaimer: *This Guidebook engages with systems-level analysis, including discussions of social, political, and economic structures, in order to better understand and prevent sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). This content is provided for educational and capacity-building purposes and is grounded in the Ottawa Rape Crisis Centre's charitable mandate to support survivors, advance public awareness, and promote the prevention of violence.*

In accordance with the requirements set out by the Canada Revenue Agency, this resource is non-partisan in nature. It does not endorse or oppose any political party or candidate, nor does it seek to influence electoral outcomes. Any

discussion of public policy, legislation, or systems of power is intended to contribute to broader public understanding of the social conditions that shape experiences of SGBV and to support informed, evidence-based dialogue.

A Note Before We Begin: *Reading about sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and oppression can be difficult to engage with. Please be gentle on yourself and perhaps explore resources in [these healing rooms](#) if you need a break. These healing rooms are interactive online spaces that are free and open for anyone to use, and offer a variety of resources designed to support mental health and healing.*

The pandemic and its ripple effects have exposed and deepened the cracks in our social support systems, leading to increasingly complex needs and a surge in demand for mental health and **trauma-informed**¹ services—stretching the **anti-violence sector's** resources to a breaking point (Felten, 2023). In this context, we began asking the seemingly impossible question: what would it take to prevent **sexual** and **gender-based violence** (SGBV) before it occurs? Grappling with this question required us to clarify the roots of SGBV. We know that at its core, SGBV is about **power** and control, not sexual desire (see [OCRCC, 2012](#)). Centering power and control revealed the need to strengthen the connections between broader systems and structures of power, and individuals' lived experiences of violence. As an organization,

we recognized that we needed to make these links clearer for ourselves in order to better serve our community.

This reflection prompted us to turn more intentionally toward **anti-oppressive** approaches, which challenge power imbalances at systemic and structural levels. We then developed this project specifically with the goal of deepening our understanding of anti-oppression and sharing that knowledge more broadly across the anti-violence sector.

Through conversations with community members and partner organizations, it became increasingly clear that solely focusing on managing individual cases risks reinforcing a cycle of crisis response. While individual interventions remain essential, without

¹Please note that definitions of **bolded** words can be found in the [Glossary](#) (Appendix A).

complementary **upstream solutions**, they can quickly deplete both individual and organizational capacity. To meaningfully prevent SGBV, we must move beyond reacting to harm and address the broader systems that produce and sustain it. This requires critically examining the scope and manifestations of **oppression** and violence, alongside what it truly means to embed anti-oppressive practice into our work.

We acknowledge that historically, this has been an area of growth for ORCC and most importantly, we acknowledge that there is still much work to be done. This is a priority for us moving forward as we commit to continual learning and growth.

As a practical step forward, this project seeks to pilot anti-oppressive practice across all aspects of our work. Specifically, it aims to establish promising approaches to direct service delivery through:

- a) the development of this anti-oppressive Guidebook; and,
- b) the piloting and evaluation of therapeutic programs (namely, art-based, movement-based, and nature-based healing) that embody the principles outlined in this Guidebook.

Together, these initiatives demonstrate how anti-oppressive theory can translate into accessible and transformative practices on the ground.

Report Overview

Who can use this resource?

This resource has been designed primarily for service providers in the anti-violence sector, but we believe it offers valuable insights for anyone interested in anti-oppressive approaches. Whether you work directly with community members, manage programs, or focus on policy and advocacy, this Guidebook contains elements that we hope may influence your practice and ultimately strengthen the sector. Achieving anti-oppressive outcomes requires coordinated action across organizations and sectors, so the more people who engage in the learning and unlearning process outlined in this Guidebook, the more effective our collective impact will be.

How might this resource be used?

This resource is intended to guide readers through the learning and unlearning process that our team has engaged in over the last several years; offering entry points for service providers to apply this material to their practice in a way that makes sense to them. Our aim is not to provide a definitive or comprehensive account of either SGBV or anti-oppressive practice (AOP), but rather to share knowledge and critical questions that can support collective shifts in how we understand and respond to violence.

We want to reiterate that this Guidebook is not prescriptive. Instead, it is meant to

serve as a starting point, inviting reflection, dialogue and action. To support this process, we have included reflection questions in [Appendix B](#) to encourage you to digest, apply, and continue to reflect on the content after reading. We hope that the content along with these reflection questions might disrupt rigid ways of thinking and encourage readers to consider alternative approaches. For example, one author intends to use this Guidebook as a touchstone for future research by critically examining language choices to ensure they actively disrupt power imbalances, and by grounding educational and knowledge-mobilization materials in anti-oppressive, systems-level approaches.

Ultimately, our goal is to lay the groundwork for more coordinated, systemic action toward violence prevention.

Report Foundation: Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

What you will be reading throughout this document emerges from a **critical discourse analysis (CDA)** of commonly used resources among sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) service providers. This section will briefly explore the methodology of CDA to explain why we chose it to analyse the resources we collected.

As a set of analytical techniques, CDA uncovers the meanings embedded in texts and conversations. It also analyzes² how spoken and written language

² CDA analysis is usually inductive, but you can also use abductive or transductive inference by oscillating your analysis between a focus on structure and a focus on action (Fairclough, 2013).

creates, legitimizes, and reinforces power relationships, social and economic hierarchies, and **ideologies** (van Dijk, 2015). CDA is an ‘unflattering mirror’ which aims to show how discourse normalizes the imbalance of social and political power (and subsequent social inequities) to the point that it is both difficult to see, and hard to imagine a world without these inequalities (Fraser & Seymour, 2017).

‘Discourse’ can be a somewhat muddy term, and while it is often associated with language, communication, and debate, it also refers to broad bodies of social knowledge that shape our perceptions and behaviours (Fraser & Seymour, 2017). These bodies of social knowledge can sometimes be referred to as ‘common knowledge’, the status quo, or ‘the way things are’. Discourses shape particular perspectives and ways of engaging with the world, which are closely linked to broader social processes that legitimize power structures (Fraser & Seymour, 2017). In this way, they influence not only what can be said, but also how concepts and social issues like SGBV are understood and addressed. The power which certain individuals and groups hold within society grants them the ability to shape—and legitimate—the discourse around SGBV, including what constitutes violence, how perpetrators should (or should not) be held accountable, how social institutions like the legal system or police should respond, and how **survivors**³ can and should be supported.

One clear example of this process is the “manosphere.” Through online forums, social media, and influencer-driven content, manosphere discourse circulates shared narratives about masculinity, entitlement,

and gender relations that position men as dominant and frame gender equality as a threat. These narratives do not simply reflect individual opinions; they actively shape beliefs and behaviours, normalize misogyny, and reinforce power relations that underpin and justify SGBV (see McCullough, 2023).

When such discourses go largely unchallenged, the dominance of some groups (e.g., cisheterosexual, White men) over others (e.g., cisgender, trans women, and racialized folks) becomes normalized. This normalization leads to a gradual and often unnoticed progression along a continuum of violence, where attitudes slowly evolve into actions (Fraser & Seymour, 2017). Over time, these actions eventually shape the status quo, and “a baseline level of oppression is established without the majority of people noticing” (Fraser & Seymour, 2017, p. 67). Importantly, “we all occupy a place on this continuum; in the words that we speak, the prejudices that we perpetuate, and the injustices we fail to challenge” (Fraser & Seymour, 2017, p. 67). In other words, we are all implicated in these systems of **domination**, even if we ourselves have never directly and purposefully perpetrated or explicitly condoned violence or oppression.

The main objectives of CDA are a) to analyse discursive practices that reflect or construct social problems; b) to investigate how ideologies can become frozen in language and try to break the ice; and c) to increase awareness of how to apply these objectives to specific cases of injustice and misuse of power (Bloor & Bloor, 2014). CDA contends that language is never neutral, but rather critiques and ultimately aims to change the status quo (van Dijk, 1993). Because CDA visibilizes power

³There are varying perspectives on the use of terms such as victims, survivors, or victim-survivors. Please refer to our [Glossary](#) for an explanation of our language and phrasing choices within this document.

imbalances between groups of people and is used to understand, expose and challenge social inequality (van Dijk, 1993; van Dijk, 2015), it was a natural choice to use this as a framework to examine oppression, and its antithesis, anti-oppression, more closely. We report on our CDA coding framework (see [Appendix C](#)) and general results throughout our review of the seven main systems of oppression; our results are at times integrated into our discussion or outlined in a “What we saw” subsection.⁴

Positionality Check

A central aim of this Guidebook is to build a critical understanding of power and domination, which we understand to be root causes of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) (ORCC, 2023). We encourage readers to apply this critical lens not only to the resources that inform our work, but also to themselves.

This process begins with **positionality**—reflecting on the social identities that shape our lives, such as race, class, gender, ability, and sexual orientation (Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019). These identities influence where we experience **privilege**, where we face oppression, and how both are connected to broader systems of power.

As service providers within the SGBV sector, recognizing our positionality and privilege means acknowledging the role we may be playing in upholding or contributing to ongoing systems and structures of oppression (Montilla, 2022). If we are committed to providing anti-oppressive approaches, “we have to be prepared to critically analyze how oppression occurs through the various

activities and social practices we engage in with others” (Potts & Brown, 2015, p. 18). If we respond to the concept of privilege with defensiveness, or claim total innocence in being a part of systemic structures of power, then we are avoiding acknowledging the systemic nature of inequity and injustice (Bernhardt & Cooper, 2022). As employees within a larger state or state-funded system (e.g., child welfare, the criminal justice system, housing services), SGBV service providers such as social workers often inadvertently play a part in legitimizing, perpetuating and benefitting from ongoing injustice (e.g., being paid by a state-run agency that systematically marginalizes specific groups).

Importantly, however, social workers (and other types of SGBV workers) also work tirelessly to stake out policies that challenge or protest policies that reflect the interests of the state or of dominant groups (Baines, 2011).

As we will see throughout this document, how we position ourselves as service providers within the sector and the very language we use in our day-to-day lives can either reinforce, or begin to dismantle the power dynamics shaping entire systems of oppression. Understanding our privilege and unlearning how we contribute to broader systems of power and oppression is the first step to activating social change (see [Wilmerding et al., 2018](#)).

To this end, we’d like to acknowledge our social location and positionality as two White, middle-class, cisgender researchers engaged in the development of this Guidebook. We recognize that our perspective is shaped by privilege, and we cannot fully articulate the **intersectional** complexities of the lived

⁴For a deeper understanding of the discussion outlined in these sections, we recommend you refer to the coding dictionary in [Appendix C](#).

experiences of those who face multiple and overlapping forms of oppression. As Ristock (2002) reminds us, research is a reflective process that is shaped by the perspectives of people conducting it. In acknowledging the inherent limitations of our positionality, we aim to approach this Guidebook with humility and intentionality.

We also recognize the layers of power inherent in the production and sharing of knowledge, and strive to approach this work from a framework of equity, accessibility, and openness. We are committed to avoiding the trap of positioning our voices as authoritative or homogenizing the diverse experiences of those affected by SGBV. Through this commitment, we hope to foster a more inclusive and dynamic space where diverse perspectives shape the narrative around SGBV. We are deeply grateful to the community members who provided thoughtful feedback informed by their varied personal and professional experiences, which has strengthened this Guidebook in meaningful ways.



Section I: **Current Context**

Defining Violence

Predominant discourse(s) around GBV and
SV Historical Overview

Predominant responses to SGBV

Section I: Current Context

Defining Violence

As violence itself is a central focus of this Guidebook, we want to start by clearly distinguishing between *direct*, *structural*, *cultural*, and *symbolic* violence, while also emphasizing how these forms are interconnected and often reinforce one another:

Direct violence refers to visible acts of violence, such as interpersonal violence (violence between individuals) or collective violence, where groups use violence to achieve political, economic, or social goals. Examples of collective violence include gang warfare, terrorism, rape as a weapon of war and the mass removal/displacement of people from their homelands (Fraser & Seymour, 2017).

Structural violence refers to “social arrangements that are embedded in the political and economic organization of our social world” which privilege certain groups while putting others at a disadvantage (Farmer et al., 2006, p. 1686 in Fraser & Seymour, 2017, p. 26). This can manifest in unequal access to resources, education, healthcare, and/or political power (to name a few).

Cultural violence consists of cultural norms, ideologies, language and values that justify or normalize direct and structural violence. Fraser & Seymour (2017) suggest that “cultural violence is internalized, while structural violence is institutionalized”, which allows exploitation and repression to be seen as ‘natural’ or even invisible (p. 27).

Symbolic violence operates within both structural and cultural violence by framing cultural norms, values, and social structures as natural and unchangeable, even though they are products of “historical struggle and human invention” (Loveman, 2005, p. 1655). This form of power influences people’s beliefs and behaviours through symbols, language, and social norms, rather than physical force. Importantly, and “[s]omewhat paradoxically, while symbolic power derives from the *recognition* of legitimate authority, symbolic power produces its effects through *misrecognition*, that is, through the appearance that no power is being wielded at all” (Loveman, 2005, p.1655). Socially prescribed gender norms and class relations are particularly relevant examples of symbolic violence (Fraser & Seymour, 2017).

Building on this understanding of violence as multi-layered and interconnected, we now turn to defining sexual and gender-based violence, which are commonly referred to in this Guidebook together as SGBV. The following definitions situate sexual and gender-based violence, not only as a set of individual acts, but as a form of violence that is produced, enabled, and sustained by structural, cultural, and symbolic forces:

Sexual violence: An umbrella term used to describe unwanted sexual behaviour that is direct or implied and is committed against a person without their consent. Examples of sexual violence include but aren’t limited to “rape, sexual abuse, forced pregnancy, forced sterilization, forced abortion, forced prostitution, trafficking, sexual enslavement, forced circumcision, castration and forced nudity” (Office of the High Commissioner, 2014, para 1).

Gender-based violence: An umbrella term for “any act that is perpetrated against a person’s will and is based on [socially prescribed] gender norms and unequal power relationships. It encompasses threats of violence and coercion. It can be physical, emotional, psychological, or sexual in nature, and can take the form of a denial of resources or access to services. It inflicts harm on **women, girls**, men and boys,” and gender diverse individuals” (UNHCR in Abji, 2019, p. 14). From our perspective, discussions and analysis of “gender-based violence [also] includes a rigorous assessment of **colonialism**, anti-Blackness, racialization, systemic poverty, gender identity, sexual orientation, **ableism**, and citizenship status” (MacDougall et al., 2022, p. 9).

Predominant discourse(s) around GBV and SV

Historical Overview

Prior to the 1970s, discourse surrounding—and subsequent perceptions of—rape were extremely narrow. News or police reports often depicted it as an attack by ‘disturbed’ or ‘deviant’ strangers at night (Stanko, 1995).

Women were only viewed as ‘victims’ if they weren’t engaged in ‘risky’ behaviour such as drinking, using drugs, or dressing in a certain way. As McMahon (2011) explains, these stereotypes about rape, perpetrators, and victims have created “powerful blueprint[s] for what society considers a ‘real’ rape and who is a ‘real’ victim” (p. 2). For example, prior to the 1960s, marital rape was not considered ‘real’ rape; in fact, it was only through consciousness-raising sessions (i.e., collectively sharing formerly ‘private’ traumatic experiences of SGBV and critically framing these experiences using language rooted in

broader processes and patterns) that women started to “alter the terms upon which rape was socially and legally understood” (Loney-Howes, 2020, p. 18) and began to try to dispel rape myths (Estrich, 1987). Sadly, to this day, rape myths continue to influence public and personal perceptions of sexual and gender-based violence. In the 1970s, there was a significant effort to shift this perception, focusing on perpetrators and framing rape as an issue of power and control, rather than deviance or mental illness. The 1980s saw further progress in moving away from the ‘stranger narrative’ by recognizing that most sexual assaults are committed by someone the survivor knows (McMahon, 2011). While these advocacy efforts have achieved “far-reaching milestones,” there is still much work to be done (McMahon, 2011, p. 1), as we continue to experience the consequences of living in a rape culture.

Originally coined by **feminist** activists in the 1970s, the term “**rape culture**” describes the broader cultural setting within which these discourses exist and are reproduced. Rape culture is “a culture in which sexual violence is treated as the norm and victims are blamed for their own assaults” (Taub, 2014, para. 3). Beyond sexual violence itself, it references the “cultural norms and institutions that protect rapists, promote impunity, shame victims, and demand that women make unreasonable sacrifices to avoid sexual assault” (Taub, 2014, para. 3). Importantly, despite the **patriarchal** power structures giving rise to rape culture and generally benefitting men, this culture also ignores the fact that men can be victims of rape and sexual assault, leaving men without social support and legal protection (Taub, 2014). Examples of rape culture you may be familiar with are news stories, police reports, or social media using victim-blaming language such as “high-risk lifestyle”, “sex worker”, and “drug user” as rhetorical

strategies to downplay the seriousness of the crime or to take the focus away from the perpetrator(s) and focus on characteristics of the survivor(s). Influential media such as TV,⁵ films,⁶ pornography,⁷ music,⁸ and sports⁹ also reinforce discourses aligned with rape culture. Big names in the entertainment industry, including Harvey Weinstein and Sean Combs, have been convicted of multiple sexual assaults and evidence shows that entire groups of people knew about it for decades and did nothing to address it. Further, sometimes it is the silences which reveal the biases and stigma inherent in SGBV discourses; namely, silences around violence against certain groups (e.g., sex workers, **racialized women, Indigenous women, 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals**). Through media, we see how both the content that is included and what is excluded shape perceptions of SGBV, contributing to the harmful process of desensitizing audiences to this violence.

Recently, the COVID-19 pandemic brought prevailing discourses around intimate partner violence (IPV), a form of GBV, into sharp focus. Researchers at Western University found that Canadian news media generally framed IPV as a private, isolated event, and 55% of analyzed articles oversimplified IPV by focusing on its physical aspects while failing to highlight less visible (but equally harmful) forms of IPV such as emotional, sexual, and financial abuse (Naeemzadah & Wathen, 2023). Despite this oversimplification, 25% of articles did in fact portray IPV as a social problem (dubbing it a “shadow pandemic”) requiring systemic advocacy efforts and policy

changes. These study findings suggest that although damaging discourses surrounding IPV continue to circulate, there is a slow shift toward viewing IPV and other forms of GBV as a complex, structural phenomenon requiring a systemic and structural response. Despite this progress, there remains a need to move beyond **individualistic**, reactive, and **depoliticized** approaches which continue to harm survivors, fail to hold perpetrators and broader societal structures accountable, and force organizations working in the sector into a cycle of crisis management. Below, we outline the persistent gaps and concerning trends in predominant discourses on SGBV.

Disconnect Between Theory and Practice

Consider a social worker providing trauma counselling at a sexual assault centre. They are well-versed in

anti-oppressive theory and often hear calls to dismantle systemic inequalities—calls that resonate deeply with their values. However, the reality of their daily practice is dominated by constant crisis management. Each day, they support clients navigating acute trauma, housing insecurity, or suicidal ideation, leaving little time or capacity for broader systemic advocacy. For instance, while they want to unpack with a client how the criminal legal system perpetuates harm or how classism shapes access to safe housing, the structure of their role only allows for 8–10 short-term counselling sessions. Within these constraints, their focus narrows to immediate

⁵ <https://www.bustle.com/articles/163620-11-moments-from-90s-tv-shows-which-perpetuated-rape-culture>

⁶ <https://www.commonsensemedia.org/articles/5-classic-movies-that-can-trigger-conversations-about-sexual-assault-and-consent>

⁷ Fritz, N., Malic, V., Paul, B., & Zhou, Y. (2020). A descriptive analysis of the types, targets, and relative frequency of aggression in mainstream pornography. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 49(8), 3041–3053. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-020-01773-0>

⁸ <https://spicedbeats.com/2020/08/13/the-terrifying-normalization-of-sexual-assault-in-hip-hop/>

⁹ <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/hockey-culture-systemic-problem-minister-of-sport-says-1.6601431>

safety and stabilization, often under immense pressure. By the end of each day, their energy is spent simply trying to help clients survive. They might feel that this is where advocacy organizations like the Ontario Coalition of Rape Crisis Centres or Ending Sexual Violence Association of Canada come in—to take on the larger fight for systemic change so they don't have to. Yet this division of labour can feel disjointed and incomplete. The disconnect between their theoretical understanding of structural oppression and the limitations of the roles they're funded to perform can leave many frontline workers feeling ethically conflicted, emotionally exhausted, and disillusioned with the system they're a part of. We want to reiterate that this cycle of crisis management is by design, and not a result of personal failures. Additionally, we hope that this Guidebook may offer some insights to break free from that unsustainable cycle and engage in meaningful, yet manageable anti-oppressive practice.

This example above highlights a common tension across the anti-violence sector, which is the well-known disconnect between social work theory and practice (Seymour, 2012; Hill Collins, 2000). This gap is often driven by educational, organizational, and sectoral cultures, which includes barriers to accessing theory outside of academic circles as well as the tendency of theories to overlook the micro-level influences on violence that practicing social workers encounter daily (Seymour, 2012; Hill Collins, 2000). Although, as Hill Collins (2000) points out, social theories developed by women are not randomly crafted “from the rarefied atmosphere of their imaginations. Instead, social theories reflect

women's efforts to come to terms with lived experiences within intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation and religion” (p. 9). In other words, there is a deep connection between writing and speaking about SGBV and experiencing it, since many theorists who write on these topics have lived experience thereof. However, the “ivory tower” of academia, which can be marked by inaccessible jargon, paywalls preventing access to academic articles and books, and similar barriers maintain a divide between theory and practice. This Guidebook aims to be a first step towards bridging the gap between theory and practice, offering a high-level introduction to the theories that have influenced our work and have made us think differently about how to address the complex realities of violence and oppression that individuals and communities are facing.

A Focus on the Individual

Over the years—particularly under the influence of **neoliberal**¹⁰ discourse—feminist and anti-violence movements and ideas that were originally centered around advocacy and challenging power dynamics have become diluted. This shift has led to framing violence as something that occurs only between certain ‘types’ of individuals, often attributed to factors like a “poor upbringing or personal problems” (McMahon, 2011, p. 8). This perspective not only reinforces a victim-blaming narrative but also hides the reality that such violence is deeply embedded within societal and structural systems, to the point that it has become naturalized and

¹⁰ Neoliberalism has several definitions. In the context of this Guidebook, we use ‘neoliberal’ to refer to policies and a broader sociopolitical culture that seeks to “decrease the role of the government in providing social services and instead focus on individualization of problems and privatization of services with a heavy reliance on individual responsibility and accountability” (Mehrotra et al., 2016, p.154). Under a neoliberal political agenda, addressing GBV shifted from a grassroots, feminist-led social change movement to services focused on maximizing efficiency, prioritizing individual treatment of survivors, and criminalizing individual acts (e.g., battering).

normalized, and can be difficult to see (Fraser & Seymour, 2017).

While there is growing acknowledgment that SGBV is rooted in power and control rather than uncontrollable sexual desire (OCRCC, 2012), the concepts and meanings of power and control are rarely explored. This omission is perhaps unsurprising, as confronting the structural roots of violence requires a significant effort—one that many may find uncomfortable or daunting. This reluctance can manifest as either blatant denial or a disconnect from the **sociopolitical** significance of SGBV. As Lakeman (2012) aptly states:

Some people say it is not a problem, or not a real problem, or not a big problem. They quibble about methodology or semantics to draw attention from forest to trees, or they refuse to admit the possibility that social relations of power might have some bearing on the issue of violence against women (p. 72).

Focusing on **downstream** responses to oppression, downplaying the issue, or ignoring the realities of structural oppressions altogether has become the norm, largely because it's the easier and more familiar path. Yet, this approach avoids addressing the root cause of oppression, which is where the real, transformative work is needed (Linder, 2018). Consequently, we often find ourselves stuck in a cycle of vaguely referencing the mechanisms of power and control without engaging in meaningful discussions on how to challenge them, leading to a continued focus on responding to individual acts of violence. Another key facet of individualization of SGBV within the anti-violence sector is its focus on the concept of consent as a potential prevention strategy. However, this only reinforces broader neoliberal ideologies which focus on individual responsibility and choice

(University of Victoria, 2017). As Colpitts (2020) highlights,

Consent campaigns illustrate this depoliticized framing by (mis)representing sexual violence as an interpersonal issue resulting from miscommunication and a lack of knowledge about consent (Beres, 2018), which fails to acknowledge the power relations inherent in sexual violence [...]. Representing consent as a negotiation between equal individuals who have the capacity to “just say no” (or yes) and have their “no” respected (Burkett and Hamilton 2012) leaves white masculine sexual entitlement unaddressed. It also fails to account for how certain populations are constructed as sexually available and always already consenting (Crenshaw 1991) while others are constructed as inherently threatening (Davis 1981) based on the intersections of privilege and oppression (p. 52).

Colpitts' argument here references several problems with dominant consent narratives, including their silence on the racist history of rape culture: as Crenshaw (1989) explains, “when Black women were raped by white males, they were being raped [...] as Black women specifically: their femaleness made them sexually vulnerable to racist domination, while their Blackness effectively denied them any protection” (p. 158-9).

Crenshaw (1991) goes on to specify that racist stereotypes construct Black women as inherently promiscuous and ‘unrapeable’, which undermines their credibility when reporting experiences of sexual violence and trying to access supports. Green (2017) explores how these stereotypes are applied to Indigenous women, unpacking the harms of being sexually fetishized and objectified by White men. Highlighting another angle of the **racism** inherent in rape myths, Davis (1981) describes the long history of

constructing perpetrators of sexual violence as racialized Others and how the myth of the Black rapist came to be. This sordid history of racist rape myths is erased in most “just say no” consent campaigns. As the above examples show, individualistic and ahistorical approaches to consent not only oversimplify the complexities of SGBV, but also reinforce existing power imbalances, leaving systemic issues of privilege and oppression such as anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism largely unchallenged.

These prevailing views on violence significantly influence how we respond to it, as evidenced by the many prevention programs that focus, at least in part, on consent (Crooks et al., 2019). This individual-level approach is also reflected in the research and theory that inform these practices. As Adams et al. (2015) point out, psychological science typically promotes “individual-oriented strategies for coping with oppression that provide individual relief from oppressive circumstances but do little to address the broader context of racism [and more] that generates the oppressive circumstances” (p.228). This not only maintains power imbalances but also contributes to the acceptance of violence as ‘status quo.’

Key tools and initiatives in the anti-violence field have also been diluted from their original intent. For instance, Ristock (2002) observes that the widely used [Power and Control Wheel](#) is no longer used for its original intent, which is to develop critical consciousness about violence, but has instead been simplified into a model that portrays violence as having the same characteristics in all situations, losing its focus on the complexity and structural nature of violence. This trend is concerning, given repeated calls for nuanced and intersectional responses to SGBV (Colpitts, 2024).

As we discussed earlier, popular media have played a central role in shaping predominant discourses surrounding SGBV. It stands to reason, then, that the sector is reflecting these stubborn, individualizing discourses. Tarana Burke, founder of the [#MeToo movement](#) has stated that “no matter how much I keep talking about power and privilege, [the media] keep bringing it back to individuals” (Rodriguez, 2018). This focus on the individual has become so normalized within our sector that even initiatives originally meant to address systemic layers of oppression are often diverted from their intended purpose, further contributing to an overemphasis on individual approaches.

While this section has emphasized the potential harm of focusing solely on the individual, we believe that responding to and preventing violence should not be seen as an approach that can only be achieved at one level or another. Anti-oppressive practice operates on multiple levels (intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural): it involves delivering services in an anti-oppressive manner to support those who have experienced violence, while also challenging the broader systems of oppression that enable such violence to occur. Both approaches are necessary, and we hope this resource offers guidance and inspiration for incorporating anti-oppressive principles into your daily practice in diverse and meaningful ways.

SGBV Language & Culture

A final gap we would like to highlight as it relates to predominant SGBV discourses is rooted in our very language. Across our sector, there are varying definitions and interpretations of key concepts such as sexual violence, gender-based violence, patriarchy, feminism, colonialism, and so on (see the

Glossary for our definitions of these, and other terms). The language we use matters because it shapes our understanding of these issues and influences our ability to address them effectively. Without a shared understanding of these foundational concepts, we risk further division at a time when unity is crucial.

bell hooks reminds us that we often “use a language that is not our own, but we use a discourse that is contaminated, one that we have adopted, and one that is historically rooted in colonial and patriarchal ideologies” (hooks, 1989, p.161 in Sinclair, 2003, p.69). Additionally, what we often accept as “natural and normal” regarding sexuality and violence is actually shaped by institutions such as schools, organized religions, the media, and government policies (Hill Collins, 2000, p. 134). As service providers, we must critically examine how we know what we know, and where the knowledge we possess comes from. We must ask ourselves, “what assumptions about the causes and effects of violence, the perpetrators and victims of it, can be seen in the way we talk about, respond to, and research violence?” (Ristock, 2002, p. 36). This line of self-questioning should include the assumptions we make about what is ‘normal’ as it relates to violence and oppression. McMahon (2011) expands on this idea of normalized violence, outlining what is considered acceptable or unacceptable violence in our society:

At one end of the continuum are behaviors that are generally considered sexually violent in our society, including rape. These acts are recognized as crimes in our culture. They are judged more harshly and carry legal ramifications [...] At the other end of the continuum are behaviors that are more commonly accepted, including sexually degrading language, pornography, and

harassment, [which] are often normalized as a part of our culture and their connection to sexual violence is not widely recognized nor judged as harmful (Stout, 1991). The behaviors on the less severe side of the continuum are important because they contribute to a culture of violence that supports and tolerates the more severe forms of violence against women [...] This continuum should be re-visioned to understand that in addition to sexism, all forms of oppression (such as racism, classism, heterosexism) should be acknowledged as contributing to a culture that allows sexual violence (Guy, 2008) (p. 3).

Varying interpretations of this ‘continuum’ of violence—coupled with entrenched stereotypes and myths about both perpetrators and survivors—not only divide service providers but also make it challenging for community members to recognize when they’ve experienced violence. Narrow definitions of SGBV, as well as hesitancy to, for example, name sexually degrading language as a form of SGBV, make it difficult for people to connect their experiences with rape culture. Without a common language and understanding, both our sector and the communities we serve are at risk of being further fragmented by making it difficult to present a united front in our service and advocacy efforts. This Guidebook is intended to encourage critical reflection of the language we use and how that might shape what we consider to be violence, what we consider to be oppression, and how we address these issues in our daily practice and approaches.

We can practice critical reflection by revisiting the term “rape culture”: this term has come to serve as a shorthand for discussing how everyday experiences of SGBV are connected to institutional and structural forms of racialized and gendered domination (see

Armstrong et al., 2018; Hill Collins, 2017). This term clarifies how everyday actions are supported by a broader culture that reproduces and legitimates sexually violent behaviour. Importantly, this term places the emphasis on the people who commit sexual violence, and focuses on transforming both the norms of aggressive masculinity and the “large-scale structures that enable rape” (Harris, 2019, p. 5 in Rentschler, 2022, p. 651). In other words, concepts like rape culture locate the problem of SGBV in structures rather than in individuals (Rentschler, 2022).

We see rape culture operating across interconnected **micro**, **meso** and **macro** levels, shaping how sexual violence is understood, responded to, and ultimately normalized in everyday life. The 2025 World Junior Hockey sexual assault case provides a clear illustration of how these dynamics unfolded across each level (Randall, 2025; CBC, 2025):

- **Micro:** At the individual level, rape culture appears through the minimization of harm and the reproduction of rape myths. Claims of sexual violence are framed as “miscommunications,” while the survivor is scrutinized for their alcohol consumption, behaviour, or memory. These narratives shift responsibility away from those who caused harm and reflect broader assumptions about (celebrity) male sexual entitlement.
- **Meso:** At the institutional level, rape culture is reinforced through organizational responses that prioritize reputation management over accountability. Hockey Canada’s lack of immediate transparency, alongside its use of membership fees to fund settlements, signals an investment in damage control and contingency planning rather than in addressing the

organizational culture that enables sexual violence to occur in the first place.

- **Macro:** At the structural level, legal and social systems place a high burden of proof on survivors and frame sexual violence as an individual failing or isolated incident. This individualization obscures how sexual harm is a predictable outcome of gendered power relations—particularly in elite sport—where male athletes are afforded disproportionate credibility, protection, and social power over women. Additionally, the acquittal of all five hockey players underscores how the criminal justice system routinely fails to hold perpetrators accountable, reinforcing structural barriers that discourage survivors from reporting sexual violence.

Predominant responses to SGBV

In this section, we will outline how organizations (including ORCC) and other social actors have understood and responded to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) to date, and how these understandings and responses have evolved over time. In our overview, and by using an anti-oppressive lens, we will highlight the gaps and problems we have found in predominant responses to SGBV; namely, neoliberal/depoliticized approaches and **Eurocentric** approaches (as we’ll explore in the sections on **Colonialism** and **Feminism**, the GBV sector has historically served White, cis women while excluding other survivor groups). Each of these approaches emerge from broader structures of oppression, such as colonialism and racism, and their pervasiveness necessitates robust anti-oppressive practice.

Gaps in Support & Prevention: A Critical Examination of Individual-Focused, Depoliticized Responses to Violence

Before drawing out the gaps and issues in predominant responses to SGBV, we want to clarify that we applaud all anti-violence work, but contend that it is necessary to go beyond these efforts and address the root causes of sexual and gender-based violence (see [Adkinson-Stevens and Timmons, 2018](#)). Our intention is not to diminish the value of programs aimed at reducing, preventing, or eradicating SGBV. These efforts are commendable and necessary. However, by examining the broader context, we aim to encourage a shift in perspective.

As noted previously, the predominant discourse around SGBV heavily emphasizes individual (micro-level) interventions after violence has occurred, along with educational initiatives aimed at changing attitudes, particularly among youth (Crooks et al., 2019). However, these approaches often fall short in reflecting actual behavioural changes (Abji, 2019; Crooks et al., 2019). A significant gap exists in programs targeting

systemic-level changes, despite increasing calls for prevention strategies that operate across all (micro, meso, and macro) levels of society (Crooks et al., 2019). This gap may stem from the fact that funding for most programs are short-term, narrowly focused on post-violence intervention, and do not encourage broader systemic thinking (Ministry of Justice, 2021). These limitations hinder the capacity to engage in the long-term initiatives required for systemic change.

Another potential reason for the widespread individualistic, depoliticized response to SGBV

is that social work education in Canada often fails to push students to critically evaluate information or to link individual experiences (e.g., of privilege, of trauma) to larger systems such as poverty, inequality, **sexism**, or racism (see [Wilkin and Hillock, 2014](#)). These individual-focused approaches align with what Baines (2011) describes as ‘mainstream’ methods. While these methods may alleviate immediate crises, they depoliticize social problems, thereby failing to address the larger dynamics shaping our current climate of violence. They also miss opportunities to envision alternative solutions that could be pursued with and for clients, placing “leaky band-aids on deeply rooted social problems” (Baines, 2011, p. 2). By contrast, anti-oppressive practice seeks to reframe issues “and to understand problems, not as a result of individual choices but also from social conditioned, limited choices and the interplay of social, political, cultural and economic factors over which service users generally have little awareness or control” (Baines, 2011, p. 20).

When considering violence prevention efforts, the sector often relies on education-based initiatives. However, education programs that aim to address ‘learned’ attitudes rooted in sexism or patriarchy frequently fall short because they treat violence or sexism as individual problems rather than systemic issues (Crooks et al., 2019). McKee (2014) points out that this approach can be problematic because changes in patriarchal ideology occur at the group level, not the individual level. An emphasis on educational programs not only diverts attention away from the underlying and deeply rooted power imbalances that shape society, but it also risks conflating attitudinal change for behaviour change (Fraser & Seymour, 2017). Ultimately, anti-oppressive approaches emphasize that education alone, without broader advocacy

efforts, is insufficient to address systemic issues (Ending Violence Association of Canada, 2021).

In addition to education initiatives, current violence prevention approaches are heavily centered around a criminal justice response, which often pathologizes perpetrators of violence. By focusing on a ‘few bad apples,’ this approach minimizes the need to address the systemic causes of violence and overlooks the role **the state** plays in creating and sustaining violence at multiple levels (Billingsley, 2019; MacDougall et al., 2022). The pathologizing of violent individuals depoliticizes violence, framing it as something that can be diagnosed, treated, and cured, which further distances it from its systemic roots (Fraser & Seymour, 2017). This response is not only insufficient but can also be “an additional risk factor, as it fails to provide potential life-saving supports and services to victims of abuse and appropriate interventions to stop perpetrators from reoffending” (Lorenzetti et al., 2017, p. 181). To address these gaps, it is crucial to develop frameworks that prioritize systems-level thinking and shift public perceptions about the root causes of SGBV and the most effective solutions (Billingsley, 2019).

Despite the need for systemic change, a scan of existing programs across Canada revealed that few, if any, have successfully bridged the gap across organizations or sectors to collectively influence policy changes (Abji, 2019). This underscores the importance of coordinated efforts to dismantle systemic barriers. We hope that this Guidebook will serve as a starting point for these critical conversations, fostering collaboration and laying the groundwork for lasting change at the systemic level.

Eurocentric Services: A Call for Intersectional Approaches

Another concern with mainstream services has been their lack of intersectional and culturally relevant **gender-based analyses (GBA+)** and service provision (MacDougall et al., 2022). These services often cater to a narrow set of Eurocentric norms and values, leaving the realities of anyone who does not belong to dominant cultural groups (e.g., White, middle-to upper-class, able-bodied, cisgender) being largely unaddressed and invisibilized. As a result, conventional SGBV prevention work often “falls short of addressing the oppression dynamics that so deeply affect power, violence, sexuality and relationships for marginalized communities” (Adkinson-Stevens & Timmins, 2018, p. 6). Without viewing violence through an intersectional, culturally-relevant lens and acknowledging that it is experienced differently across populations, current responses risk perpetuating harm against individuals seeking these services (Dale et al., 2021).



Section II: **Oppression**

What is oppression?

Power and Control

Colonialism (A)

State/Centralized Power (B)

Neoliberalism (C)

White Supremacy (D)

Connections to Violence Patriarchy (E)

(Cis)heteronormativity and (Cis)heterosexism (G)

Section II: Oppression

What is oppression?

Oppression Defined

Oppression occurs when unjust actions or policies target individuals or groups due to their affiliation with a specific group. It is not merely isolated acts of discrimination but a systematic pattern of mistreatment rooted in the unequal distribution of power between groups based on socially constructed categories like race, gender, class, and sexuality (Egale Canada & Enchanté Network, 2024; Resource Sharing Project & NSVRC, 2020). This imbalance surfaces in many ways, allowing dominant groups to impose their belief systems, values, and ways of life onto others, while also depriving oppressed groups of ways to make a fair living, to participate in all aspects of social life, or to experience basic freedoms and human rights (Baines, 2011).

Oppression can manifest both externally (i.e., imposed by others) and internally. Internal oppression occurs when oppressed groups start to believe that dominant perspectives are the “best and exclusive reality” (Baines, 2011, p. 1). This internalization can lead to feelings of self-hate, shame, and the rejection of one’s own cultural identities and experiences, deepening the psychological impacts of oppression (Icarus Project, 2015). This internalization concurrently strengthens systems of oppression, while undermining the resilience of oppressed groups, and is arguably “the most dangerous” form of oppression (Icarus Project, 2015, p. 8; Hill Collins, 2000).

Metaphorically, oppression can be seen as a force that “presses” individuals or groups, limiting their freedom to grow or move

(Resource Sharing Project & NSVRC, 2020). As described in the [Foundations of Advocacy Training Manual](#), oppression traps individuals between forces that mould and limit them, depriving them of opportunities for autonomy and agency (Resource Sharing Project & NSVRC, 2020). Ultimately, oppression is a systemic force that not only restricts the rights of individuals but also enforces and maintains an unjust social order. This inequitable social order (which becomes the “status quo”) emerges from the unequal distribution of power between social groups and maintains itself by abusing this power imbalance. Consequently, recognizing and fighting against oppression should be an essential component of our daily practice.

How Does it Operate?

Institutions such as governments, education, media, health care, religion, laws and policies play a crucial role in upholding power imbalances that form the foundation of oppression (Resource Sharing Project & NSVRC, 2020). These structures shape and reinforce cultural norms, societal beliefs and values that privilege certain groups, while excluding and harming others (Adkison-Stevens & Timmons, 2018). This dynamic “actively provides unearned privileges and protections to some,” allowing them to remain unaware of—or even benefit from—systemic forms of oppression such as racism, sexism, ableism, **classism**, and **transphobia** (Icarus Project, 2015, p. 7). In everyday life, this privilege can look like an individual never needing to think about SGBV, as was noted in an advisory committee meeting. Invisibilized forms of privilege and protection can also take the form of not being worried about

walking home alone at night, or feeling safe while interacting with institutions or government systems (see [Ait Bihi Ouali et al., 2020](#)). Those with power often leverage these unearned privileges and protection, by staying “sheltered” consciously or subconsciously, to maintain their status or wealth at the expense of oppressed groups (Icarus Project, 2015, p. 7).

Oppression is rooted in relationships of domination based on socially constructed categories, such as race, gender, and class, which reinforce hierarchies of superiority and inferiority (Hill Collins, 2000). These hierarchies are deeply woven into political systems as well as societal norms that distribute power and wealth in patterned ways. These hierarchies are further entrenched by the simultaneous processes of perpetrators dominating, exploiting or oppressing others and by processes which socialize us all to behave in ways that uphold the status quo (hooks, 1986). However, oppression is not inevitable or unchangeable. As Baines (2011) reminds us, social relationships that uphold oppression are enacted by individuals, meaning that people have the power to dismantle these oppressive systems and create more equitable relationships. In essence, oppression operates through institutionalized power structures, but the potential for change lies within human agency and is made possible through collective efforts to challenge these systems.

Spotlight: Oppression & Trauma

Oppression and trauma are closely intertwined, with systemic discrimination often leading to significant harm. In its various forms, oppression can inflict mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual trauma on individuals and communities (Resource

Sharing Project & NSVRC, 2020). For many oppressed people, trauma is ongoing, longstanding, repetitive, and perpetrated by more than one person or group (Wilkin & Hillock, 2014). While structural discrimination may not always involve overt violence, its cumulative impact over time can result in severe trauma, including conditions like PTSD (NWAC, n.d.). The harm caused by this trauma can be profound, leading to behaviours that, though often misunderstood, are essential survival strategies in systems designed to oppress. Examples of such survival strategies include but aren't limited to hypervigilance, self-medication and/or withdrawal from people or activities (Resource Sharing Project & NSVRC, 2020).

Spotlight: Oppression & Violence

Oppression serves as the root of violence, as it creates an environment where there are power imbalances and dominant groups are more likely to perpetrate violence against oppressed groups, either consciously or subconsciously to maintain their position of power (Quinn, 2010; Adkison-Stevens & Timmons, 2018). This power imbalance is maintained through a variety of means, including “institutionalized physical and sexual violence; economic inequities; defining reality through control of media, schools, and public institutions; [and] institutionalized discrimination in jobs and housing” (Quinn, 2010, p. 100). These tactics of control and violence used by institutions are then mirrored in individual acts of violence. Given this connection, addressing both oppression and abuse at both the institutional (“macro”) and interpersonal (“micro”) level is crucial to effectively combat violence. Incorporating an anti-oppression framework into organizational practices (“meso” level), through training, mission statements, and

service philosophies, can be a strong starting point to strengthen the ability of service providers to address abuse and confront the broader social norms that sustain these cycles of violence.

Power and Control

Power and Control Defined

Lakeman (2012) explains that, at its core, “power is the ability to act, to do, to exert agency” (p. 10). The way society is structured means that not everyone has equal opportunities to use power to shape their own lives. Members of dominant groups typically have more freedom to act and exercise agency compared to those experiencing multiple layers of oppression. Additionally, these dominant groups often seek to maintain or expand their power, consciously or unconsciously turning “power-to-do” into “power-over” others (Lakeman 2012, p. 10). This dynamic often goes unnoticed, with some individuals remaining unaware that their actions rely on undermining the power of others. This is the root of privilege: some people enjoy unearned advantages that depend on, and reinforce, the oppression, devaluation, and dehumanization of others (MacDougall et al., 2022). The following section will unpack various axes of oppression (e.g., colonialism, neoliberalism, cisheteronormativity), all of which are concerned with power and control (Baines, 2011; Sinclair, 2003), and each shape the individual and structural patterning of SGBV.

How Does it Operate?

It’s essential to consider how power and control operate across different levels—between individuals, within institutions, and at broader structural levels (hooks, 1986). The exercise of personal power and dominance over others is made possible by “socially accepted hierarchies of power that include sexism, racism, colonisation, ableism, ageism, homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia, transmisogyny, and classism” (Ministry of Justice, 2021, p. 11). However, these imbalances are not just the result of individual actions by members of dominant groups. They are often *organized and institutionalized*, sanctioned and upheld by legal systems and reinforced by media, laws, and education (van Dijk, 1993). There are consequently clear links between interpersonal violence and state-sanctioned violence against Black, Indigenous, and racialized communities (Bernhardt & Cooper, 2022).

Because of these linkages, we utilized critical discourse analysis¹¹ as our methodology of choice; recognizing that discourse is itself a power resource, because those who can influence others’ knowledge, attitudes or ideologies about SGBV at structural levels (e.g., through media, education, or science) are most likely to indirectly control the minds and actions of others at the individual and interactional level (see van Dijk, 2015).

A main assumption that grounds anti-oppressive practice is that SGBV is not an individual problem, but rather a social issue rooted in power imbalances: gender-based violence “occurs within and stems from the context of the entrenched unequal structural power oppressing women and girls in our society” (MacDougall et al., 2022,

¹¹ Note, throughout the remainder of this section, we integrate findings from our critical discourse analysis to depict how these systems appear in SGBV resources.

p. 4). Sexual violence, in particular “is about entitlement, dominance, power, control, and humiliation [and] is a result of power imbalances that stem from gender inequality and systemic oppression” (Break the Silence NS, n.d., p. 1). Indeed, these systemic power imbalances cause violence and abuse at both the individual and community level and are deeply embedded within structural systems. Yet, these larger structures of power remain hidden, leading to the framing of social problems as “the result of individual difficulties and poor decision-making rather than unequal distribution of power, resources and affirming identities” (Baines, 2011, p. 5). Additionally, power is not always exercised through overtly abusive acts.

Instead, it often manifests in minor, everyday actions (van Dijk, 2015). Although these everyday actions reinforce and create power imbalances, we do not notice it. We remain convinced that no power is being exerted and that all individuals are equal, while power imbalances continue to operate invisibly (van Dijk, 1993).

As van Dijk (1993) points out, these forms of dominance become so entrenched “that they seem natural until they begin to be challenged” (p. 255). These subtle, invisibilized workings of power are connected to **hegemony**,¹² which refers to a process by which “the minds of the dominated can be influenced in such a way that they accept dominance, and act in the interest of the powerful out of their own free will” (van Dijk, 1993, p. 255). We’ll explore hegemony more

in the section on **State Power**, but for now it’s important to note that it is in part the outcome of internalized oppression, which involves the internal acceptance of existing patterns of power imbalance and mechanisms of control.

Connection to Violence

Although violence is rooted in power, domination, and inequality, these underlying factors are sometimes overlooked in research on, responses to, and discussions around SGBV (Wilkin & Hillock, 2014; Gill, 2018). However, Koehn (2007) emphasizes the critical importance of incorporating these power dynamics into front-line service practices; her study found that one of the most important factors in sexual abuse counselling with women was the practitioner’s approach to power and control issues. These issues are

especially salient for clients living at the intersections of oppression. Systems of violence, such as colonialism, patriarchy, racism, and heteronormativity create “conditions within which violence against those with the least power in these systems has been and continues to be ignored, accepted, and in some cases encouraged” (Dale et al., 2021, p. 195). As we’ll explore, SGBV can be both an outcome of and tool for maintaining power imbalances, and the state itself (alongside other systems of oppression) uses both direct and indirect tactics of oppression to promote and enable SGBV (Adkinson-Stevens & Timmons, 2018).

¹² Hegemony is a complex concept that can be understood with reference to a cause and effect relationship: it begins with the dominance and control of one group or entity over others, often through the shaping of cultural, political, and social norms. Over time, and with effective and continuous influence over these cultural, political, and social norms, hegemony appears as the “common sense”- it is a view of the world that is inherited from the past and uncritically absorbed, tending to reproduce a social homeostasis or moral/political passivity (see Stoddart, 2007). Stoddart (2007) goes on to argue that within a hegemonic social order, both *coercion* and *consent* operate as alternative mechanisms for the exercise of power: the former involves the use of force against those who refuse to abide by existing power dynamics, while the latter convinces people to abide by existing power dynamics. This process of convincing people to accept power dynamics that do not benefit them is, essentially, a long game of gaslighting and manipulation. For more details on this topic, please see Stoddart (2007), and for an example related to hegemonic masculinity, see Raewyn Connell’s brief overview [here](#) - at 1:23).

While much of the focus in existing research and resources is on how dominant groups use violence to exert power and control over others, it's important not to reduce violence to a simple binary of "powerful versus powerless" (Fraser & Seymour, 2017, p. 68). Consider examples of violence directed at police by racialized individuals, or children exerting violence against their parents—which are often pointed to as counterexamples that obscure the broader and more pervasive systems of power and control at play. However, these instances (among many others) may be a demonstration of using violence to express one's sense of being powerless or alienated, rather than exerting one's social dominance or privilege (Fraser & Seymour, 2017). Similarly, the term "lateral violence"¹³ describes these instances and patterns of displaced anger or violence towards people with whom we share marginalized or oppressed social positions, rather than toward the dominant group(s) who are actually creating and benefitting from oppressive conditions. It is important to confront the internalization of oppressive beliefs, since this internalization process can misdirect the anger of experiencing injustice towards others rather than at oppressive structures. In addition to internalized oppression, community organizations serving equity-seeking populations (e.g., 2SLGBTQIA+ or racialized communities) may unintentionally perpetrate other forms of discrimination (e.g., racism, classism, **xenophobia**) if they do not adopt intersectional, **decolonial** practices that address the complexity of power dynamics that exist even within equity-seeking groups. Although power and control are still central

to violence directed at the powerful and between oppressed individuals or groups, the motivations behind these forms of violence are distinct and can vary depending on who is enacting the violence and in what contexts.

As an individual working in the SGBV sector, it is crucial to understand the meanings of power and control, how they are imbued in and intersect *with* all of our institutions and realms of social life, and how they are driving forces of both violence broadly and SGBV specifically. Unpacking the day-to-day operation of power and control includes critically examining the SGBV service setting as a microcosm of broader social structures and interactions which advantage and protect some while disadvantaging and potentially causing harm to others. As Hoselton and Walsh (2023) explore, the discipline of social work often espouses the language of "helping," which can position the social worker as a benefactor rather than as someone working alongside the client to fight social injustices.

In our critical discourse analysis, we noted instances of such paternalistic language, which risks positioning some individuals—and identities—as being inherently in need of help and others as being inherently capable of, and suitable for helping. While we are not arguing that the act of helping another is in any way problematic, we simply want to note that it is important to avoid replicating socially accepted hierarchies in service settings. Examples of such replication include the language used when describing or engaging with clients/community members and the extent to which workplace hierarchies are (or are not) reinforced. Lastly, a particularly

¹³ See Badenes-Ribera, L., Sánchez-Meca, J., & Longobardi, C. (2019). The Relationship Between Internalized Homophobia and Intimate Partner Violence in Same-Sex Relationships: A Meta-Analysis. *Trauma, Violence & Abuse*, 20(3), 331–343. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27010970>

relevant example for all service providers is the power dynamic between funders and organizations. External entities determine funding streams, eligibility criteria, and funding amounts—directly shaping the scope and direction of our work. Recognizing and addressing these embedded power dynamics is essential if we are to move beyond our current cycle of crisis management and towards truly anti-oppressive practice in the SGBV sector.

Recognizing and addressing power imbalances using an intersectional lens is central to an anti-oppressive and culturally safer approach to practice. Examples of adjustments to daily practice that incorporate these approaches include, but aren't limited to: creating a space in your service setting for clients to smudge, create safety plans that do not involve police or child welfare if clients do not want to engage with them, creating or hosting a space for peer support groups that incorporate Indigenous healing modalities (i.e., recognizing that the power dynamics between your client and peer support workers may feel safer for them than the dynamics between themselves and a social worker or counsellor), or implementing transformative justice and traditional healing practices in your work (e.g., facilitating connections between clients and Elders or directing clients to language revitalization opportunities through apps like Goozih or to land-based healing programming) (see [NWAC, n.d.](#)).

To truly engage in AOP and work toward lasting social change that *prevents* rather than just responds to SGBV, we must commit to examining and dismantling power imbalances at multiple levels: the macro level (systems and policies that shape societal structures), the meso level (organizational policies and workplace dynamics), and the micro level (individual interactions and language). Power

and control are not only factors in acts of violence but also shape the ways in which services are delivered, who has access to them, who feels safe accessing them, and how services are experienced. As we move through the next six sections, consider how these systems of oppression and the power imbalances characterizing them exist not just “out there”—in legal, educational, and healthcare systems—but also within our own organizations, service settings, and personal interactions. By interrogating these dynamics and challenging how they manifest in everyday practice, we can move beyond individualistic approaches and work toward meaningful, systemic change.

Colonialism (A)

Colonialism Defined

Colonialism, at its core, is a practice of domination (Kohn & Reddy, 2024; Mohanty, 1988). It is a form of imperialism, which is when a state seeks to expand its power by taking territory or controlling other regions politically and economically; but always through using force, either using the military, economic force or more subtle forms of power and influence (Matthias, 2025). Multiple forms of colonialism have shaped Canada, namely extractive colonialism and ongoing settler colonialism. The focus of extractive colonialism was initially to exploit the land and Indigenous peoples for the benefit of imperial powers (i.e., France and Britain) (Roxburgh, 2023b). In extractive colonialism, the number of colonizers typically remains small compared to the Indigenous population (Roxburgh, 2023a). In contrast, settler colonialism occurs when the imperial power(s) claims the land and seeks to “progressively eliminate” and displace the Indigenous population with settlers (Roxburgh, 2021).

This process deliberately and systematically works to control, assimilate and erase Indigenous cultures and communities (NWAC, n.d.).

It's crucial to recognize that settler colonialism is not a historical event, but an ongoing structure that continues to shape today's systems, institutions, and mindsets (Wolfe, 2006). In our coding, this historicism emerged as a recurring theme across five different resources,¹⁴ with phrases such as "historical oppression," "histories of oppression," or "history of European colonialism." Statements like these position Indigenous experiences of violence as solely in the past, which effectively obscures the ongoing violence and may reduce any sense of urgency or responsibility to address the violence that continues today. As aptly noted by Roxburgh (2023a):

Many people believe Canada used to be a colony but is not one anymore, particularly after the Constitution was repatriated from England in 1982. However, this isn't accurate and there are obvious signs that Canada is an active settler colony. The land that Canada is on is privately owned by settlers and the Crown; it is not in the hands of Indigenous peoples. The government of Canada is not Indigenous and Indigenous people are not allowed to take their land back or form their own countries. Canada has different laws and rules for Indigenous people and settlers, like the Indian Act, and the settler government maintains ultimate authority in the lives of Indigenous peoples.

In other words, colonialism is the foundation of Canada's existence and its power structures—facilitating values of exploitation and violence for the benefit of some at the expense of others. It enables the state to

exploit "communities by stealing land and resources, violates people using campaigns of sexual, physical and psychological violence, exploits and disinvests in communities, removes resources from them, and then blames them for their own degraded and vulnerable conditions – which are in fact the product of state intervention"(Adkison-Stevens & Timmons, 2018, p. 4). Colonialism is deeply embedded in every layer of society, and perhaps most dangerously, has slipped into Indigenous peoples' minds, institutional structures, and is demonstrated in the erasure of entire Indigenous languages and cultures (NWAC, n.d.). Despite its pervasiveness, our coding revealed frequent silences around colonialism, even when authors were discussing disproportionate rates of violence against Indigenous women and girls. Failing to frame these acts of violence as a direct expression of colonialism reinforces a colonial narrative that conceals the role of colonialism as a structure that perpetuates such violence.

Understanding colonialism as a pervasive and ongoing structure is essential for recognizing how it continues to shape power dynamics, societal systems, and the lived experiences of Indigenous peoples. Challenging this structure requires confronting its deep-rooted impact on every level, from individual mindsets to institutional policies, and working toward genuine efforts to decolonize (see Tuck & Yang, 2012).

How Does it Operate?

As noted previously, colonial violence is embedded in everyday life and continues to manifest across various layers, from interpersonal violence to institutions like

¹⁴ Please note that we are choosing not to identify these resources because it is not our intention to "call out" certain organizations' resources, but rather to raise awareness and encourage critical thought about how common framings of colonialism are harmful.

healthcare and the justice system, as well as through “the laws, policies, and structures of Canadian society” (MacDougall et al., 2022, p. 70). There is a direct line between these structural forms of oppression and individual experiences: colonialism not only seeks to physically eliminate a people but also works to devalue, discredit, and erase their beliefs and worldviews (Fanon, 1963). Recognizing that traditional knowledge and culture are often passed down through intergenerational relationships, Adkison-Stevens and Timmons (2018) further explain:

Through colonization and cultural imperialism, the credibility of parents, elders, other supportive adults and community leaders is damaged. People in these roles are shamed, infantilized and discredited. Positive cultural norms are broken down by oppressive interventions, and replaced with dominant culture values and frameworks – often those of exploitation, violence, and power over others. Young people are encouraged to replace their own cultural norms with those of dominant culture, and to seek the expertise of colonizers over their own people (p.5).

This creates a conflict between the messages youth receive from formal sources like educators, media, and politicians (who are often part of dominant culture), and leaders within their communities. As these youth become adults, they have the choice to either embrace dominant cultural values—which extend to attitudes related to SGBV—or resist (Adkison-Stevens & Timmons, 2018). The above passage highlights how colonialism works to sever Indigenous peoples from their language, culture, and communities in order to facilitate the process of assimilation. Over time, this disconnect, paired with harmful narratives, can cause Indigenous peoples to internalize feelings of inferiority and

view “themselves through the eyes of the colonizer,” especially when colonialism as the source of harm is obscured (Stoddart, 2007, p. 214). When colonialism falls from view, structural violence is reframed as individual failure, undermining collective investment in decolonial approaches.

This underscores the power of discourse and prompts us to broaden our understanding of how genocide functions in a settler colonial context. Colonialism seeks not only to destroy a people through physical violence, but also through land dispossession, the influence on beliefs, and the erasure of cultural practices (National Inquiry into MMIWG, 2019). From this perspective, we can see how the roots of genocide are intertwined with daily actions that suppress diverse ways of knowing and allow systems of domination to continue unchecked (National Inquiry into MMIWG, 2019). One of these ‘daily actions’ is how we talk and write about colonialism and how we both implicitly and explicitly connect colonial paradigms and epistemologies (i.e., how we know what we know) to SGBV. Throughout this Guidebook, our calls for decolonizing approaches to all layers of our work are informed by the recognition of colonial paradigms as one of the roots of SGBV.

Spotlight on Direct Service/ Social Work Practice

While it is essential to understand how colonialism operates broadly in society, it is equally important to examine its impact on front-line service provision. Two key pillars of the anti-violence sector—counselling and social work—are both “rooted in Eurocentric, individualistic, and colonial theories and practices” (Montilla, 2022, p. 22). As a result, many widely accepted norms of well-being and healing are reflective of Canada’s ongoing colonial project (Montilla, 2022).

A clear example of this is the limited way that traditional mental health frameworks or conventional assessments, such as the diagnostic criteria for PTSD, fail to capture the deep impacts of cultural genocide, displacement, family separation, and institutional violence and racism experienced by Indigenous communities (Wilkin & Hillock, 2014). This erasure of colonial realities extends far beyond a single diagnosis, affecting numerous layers of the helping profession.

Another critical consideration is the influence of colonialism on service provider-client power dynamics. Caring professions have a history of imposing “White supremacist values and norms onto Indigenous communities and other marginalized populations that were deemed threatening to Canada’s social fabric” (Hoselton & Walsh, 2023, p. 38-39). Social workers play a central role in shaping child welfare legislation, which has led to the mass removal of Indigenous children from their families, a tactic that was once explicitly stated with the intention to further assimilation more ‘effectively’ than Residential Schools (CAP, 2020; CASW, 2019). This foundation of colonialism and paternalism still influences helping professions today, and service providers must remain aware of the power imbalances between themselves and the Indigenous community members they aim to support (Hoselton & Walsh, 2023).

Connection to Violence

Put simply, “[s]exual violence has been and continues to be a tool of colonization” (Break The Silence NS, n.d.). Hunt (2010) echoes this sentiment, stating “[t]he roots of sexual violence in Canada are as deep as colonialism itself” (p. 27). Since contact, colonial systems have consistently sought to dehumanize and degrade Indigenous women and girls through formal laws, policies, practices, and

media representations (Bourgeois, 2018; Craig-Sparrow 2020). These women were often portrayed as sexually available “objects,” reduced to property that could be bought and sold, a practice that persisted until slavery was abolished in 1834 across the British Empire, including Canada (Sikka, 2010; de Finney, 2017). This systematic devaluation, combined with harmful policies such as the Indian Act, Residential Schools, and forced displacement from traditional lands, has created conditions where Indigenous women are deliberate targets for SGBV. Not only do they experience higher rates and more severe forms of violence, but this violence– and its connections to other oppressions such as state neglect and racism– is often overlooked or inadequately addressed in public discourse, sending a message to both perpetrators and survivors that violence against Indigenous women, girls and gender-diverse folks will go unpunished. Instead, public discourse often blames Indigenous communities, particularly women, for the violence they experience, and reinforces colonial stereotypes (MacDougall et al., 2022). As Palmater observes, “under the guise of elections, holidays, pipelines and pandemics, genocide against Indigenous women and girls in Canada has been allowed to continue unabated with no plan to end it in sight” (2020, para 1). Colonialism is also at the root of violence experienced by

Two-Spirit and LGBTQQIA+ Indigenous people. The imposition of patriarchal ideas about the gender binary, gender role expectations, and violent penalties for not performing normative gender are a direct consequence of colonialism around the globe (Tremblay et al., 2016). This colonial violence manifests emotionally, mentally, and spiritually, causing trauma and disrupting individuals’ relationships with themselves, their communities, and the environment (NWAC, n.d.).

While this Guidebook will explore decolonial approaches in more depth, we conclude this section with a powerful reminder from MacDougall et al. (2022): “Addressing the foundational structures of colonization, which is inherently and always gendered, is intimately connected to all forms of gender-based violence [...] and anti-violence work. Anti-colonial and decolonial work is not solely for Indigenous survivors but for all survivors” (p. 149). We all hold responsibility to decolonize and engage in collective resistance.

State/Centralized Power (B)

State Power Defined

The term “state power” is a complex term, and there is no single definition that can adequately capture its scope or the way it operates (Jessop, 2009). However, we will focus on the ways in which the Canadian state operates based on a logic of domination and power imbalances as well as the state’s connection to structural, community-level, and individual forms of violence.

Canada’s system of government has three branches: the legislative, executive, and judicial. Each branch has separate powers and responsibilities that are defined in the Constitution: the legislative branch passes laws, the executive implements them, and the judicial interprets them. Consequently, in the Canadian context, state power can most broadly be defined as the structures and individuals who have the ability to pass, implement, and/or interpret the laws which govern civil society. This section will continue to explore how the implementation and exercising of state power can take various forms.

Regardless of its structure and specific organization, it is important to note that every state is founded on force (Weber, 1919). In theory, we give up our freedoms to be controlled and ‘protected’ by the state (indeed, this trade-off is what all institutions are based on). Importantly, in society more broadly, there is an implied assumption that the state does not maintain force, and if it does, then it is only to ‘keep the peace’ (Weber, 1919). However, we disagree with such assumptions, as the role of the state in reinforcing other oppressive structures—and in operating as a distinct source of oppression in its own right—becomes evident when patterns of systemic violence are examined more closely. This is especially apparent in the experiences of Indigenous communities, who have been direct and ongoing targets of state violence since the state’s inception.

Key questions we had as we were researching for and writing this Guidebook, and now pose to you readers, are:

- How can we reconcile the notion of relying on the very entity that is based on force and power imbalances to be the source of solutions to the problems emerging from these power imbalances?
- More specifically, “can a state that is thoroughly infused with racism, male dominance, class bias, and homophobia and that constructs itself in and through violence act to minimize violence” (MacDougall et al., 2022, p. 13)?
- How can we, as service providers and advocates, navigate the uneasy relationship with the state, accepting funding and rely on support from an entity which has always, in subtle (and not-so-subtle) ways, impeded social movements’ [e.g., feminist, civil rights, or 2SLGBTQIA+ rights] agendas?

How Does it Operate?

Antonio Gramsci (1971) noted that there are two ways in which the state comes into power and maintains its power over social groups/society: direct coercion or domination (also known as “hard power”) and through “consensual” forms of power (also known as “soft power”) (McKee, 2014). Gramsci’s notion of *hegemony* refers to these two key avenues through which one social group dominates others: either through force or coercion or by gaining the consent of the subordinated groups. Hegemony highlights the role of culture, ideology, and institutions in maintaining political power. Unlike traditional views of power that emphasize physical control or the use of force (what Gramsci would call “domination”), hegemony includes the type of power wielded by the ruling class to shape the beliefs, values, and norms of society in a way that makes their dominance appear natural and legitimate. A critical analysis of the state reveals this process of *appearing* neutral and even-handed even as its actions serve only the interests of dominant groups (Baines, 2011). (As you read through this Guidebook, you will note that this process of naturalizing and legitimating itself is a key theme across different ideologies and structures of oppression). By making the status quo seem natural and legitimate (i.e., the way things *are*, are the way things should be), hegemonic ideologies and structures are able to obtain the consent of the subordinated groups even though only the ruling class benefits. This consent is often achieved through the messaging spread through institutions such as schools, media, religion, and the family. Gramsci (1971) argued that hegemony is a dynamic and ongoing process, where the ruling class must constantly work to maintain consent and prevent challenges to their authority, even while simultaneously suppressing opposition

when necessary. Hegemony, therefore, is a combination of both *coercion* (hard power) and *consent* (soft power), where consent plays a crucial role in ensuring the stability of the status quo.

While Gramsci did not explicitly use the terms *hard power* and *soft power*, others have used these terms to describe his theories on *coercive* and *consensual* forms of power. Hard power refers to the use of force, laws, and institutions to maintain dominance, often through direct control or repression. This type of power is exercised through coercive mechanisms like the state or military (e.g., legislation that strips people of their bodily autonomy or reproductive rights, or police attacking and detaining protestors). A specific example of a coercive state mechanism is its immigration system, which impacts and creates further violence in the lives of individuals and communities who are already experiencing intersecting forms of violence (for more on this topic, see Mulay & Siddiqui, 2012). On the other hand, soft power refers to the more subtle ways in which ruling classes (i.e., those who possess political and economic authority) maintain control by shaping cultural norms, values, and ideologies to essentially secure consent from the population. Gramsci’s concept of *hegemonic consent* illustrates how power is often exercised not only through force but through the widespread acceptance of the status quo, where dominated groups internalize the beliefs that support the ruling class. In this way, soft power relies on the ability to shape ideology, culture, and public opinion to achieve social and political control without direct coercion.

We can clearly see the operation of hegemonic consent in the pro-Trump voting behavior among segments of racialized voters in the United States, despite his policies

stoking racist tensions and reinforcing racial divisions by framing Black and Latino communities as threats (Luscombe, 2024). In both the 2016 and 2025 elections, some racially marginalized voters—particularly in the Latino community—supported Trump due to his economic policies (e.g., tax cuts, deregulation, and support for minority entrepreneurship) or his tough stance on issues like crime and immigration, which they perceived as protecting their own families or communities (Luscombe, 2024). In this way, Trump was able to secure a degree of consent from some groups within these communities, aligning with their personal or economic interests, despite his racially charged rhetoric and policies that target racialized populations. Trump’s support base demonstrates hegemonic consent in action: Trump’s political strategy combined coercive elements (such as fear-based, divisive rhetoric) with ideological elements (framing his economic and law-and-order policies as beneficial to racialized voters). This allowed him to gain partial support from some racialized groups and sustain his political power, even as his broader agenda has rarely served their interests.

Connection to Violence

The sections above have outlined how the state maintains and legitimates the dominance of one social group over others. This dominance is maintained through both overt force (e.g., police brutality, forced sterilizations, incarceration, etc.) and through hegemony, whereby state violence is invisibilized, ignored, minimized, or rationalized, despite causing undue harm to subordinated groups such as women, 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals, Indigenous and racialized people, immigrants, and disabled people (Lakeman, 2012). In the Canadian context, there are numerous examples of

legally endorsed violence and enactment of hard power, particularly against Black and Indigenous women (Hill Collins, 1990), including forced sterilization, birth alerts, and heightened surveillance in public and private spaces (Jones, 2020). Indeed, equity-seeking folks such as racialized women repeatedly experience “legacies of violence produced by state relations” (Mulay & Siddiqui, 2012, p. 103), and their experiences of pervasive racism from police, lawyers, judges, and other state actors (e.g., child welfare workers) shape how they respond to and address their experiences of SGBV.

As Dale et al. (2021) aptly state, survivors of VAW/GBV who are already privileged turn to legal and justice systems assuming they will provide justice but are often disappointed. By contrast, individuals who have experienced intersecting forms of oppression often reject those systems, assuming they will cause further harm. In either case, survivors’ fears are often proven correct. Echoing what we noted at the outset of this section, we again invite the reader to think critically about how (if at all) the state can or should be involved in systemic solutions to SGBV; particularly for groups who have suffered at the hands of the state (i.e., equity-deserving groups).

A commitment to anti-oppressive practice requires that we critically reflect on how legally endorsed violence is both used and justified (i.e., how *soft power* is enacted) (Fraser & Seymour, 2017) and how state power intersects with other systems of oppression such as racism, colonialism, and patriarchy. As workers in the SGBV sector, we need to actively challenge not only individual acts of violence but also “the ongoing gendered violence of colonization and the attacks on Indigenous and other racialized communities by the settler state through police, the courts, the education system, and

so on” (Lakeman, 2012, p. 75). In other words, we need to be capable of shifting our gaze to see and address violence at the individual, organizational, and structural level.

What We Saw

Our critical discourse analysis (CDA) process of coding resources as it relates to state and centralized power as a structure of oppression focused on, for example, whether a resource normalized how people in positions of authority are ‘safe spaces’ or viable avenues to justice or whether it indicated (either implicitly or explicitly) that the state is separate from violence in society (i.e., that it is not itself an actor of violence and is instead a benevolent entity). In our review and coding of resources, we noticed that we were finding few explicit references to the state as a source of violence and oppression: importantly, this speaks to the invisibility of the state as an actor in perpetuating violence (we saw similar patterns in our coding of **patriarchy**). Across a number of resources, our CDA found there was a prevailing (and uncritical) contention that the state remains a viable solution to SGBV. Key examples of this were suggestions to “call the police”, “turn to trusted professionals”, or “seek legal advice” without any disclaimer or backgrounder on how these may not be safe or viable options for those who are most oppressed by these systems. As we will unpack in the next section, framing the state as a benevolent actor that is not (or cannot) be a source of violence not only frames SGBV as a phenomenon that has no structural roots (i.e., exists at the micro, individual level only), but also absolves the state of its responsibilities related to ending SGBV at *all* levels. Indeed, as Connell (2000) reminds us, “the reshaping of institutions is as necessary as the reform of individual life” (p. 218); structural, organizational, interactional, and individual changes need to happen in tandem in order to dismantle SGBV.

However, some resources did illustrate an explicitly critical stance toward the role of the state; for instance, Fraser and Seymour (2017) wrote:

We tend to think of the law as our chief defence against abuse and violence; as working in our interest to keep us safe, protect us from disorder and so on. It is important though that we think critically about the “we,” the “us,” and the “them.” In other words, the boundaries we draw between us/them shape the violences we see (and do not see), and the voices that we hear (p. 123).

Fraser and Seymour’s words encourage us to think about whose interests the law, legal system, and other state-run institutions serve (i.e., whose rights are protected and upheld) and whose interests the state ignores, discounts, and oppresses (i.e., whose rights are neglected and attacked).

Neoliberalism (C)

Neoliberalism Defined

Neoliberalism can be understood in multiple ways, but for the purpose of this Guidebook, it refers to an approach to society that minimizes government involvement in social services and reduces public spending. Instead, it shifts the responsibility for providing these social services to private organizations and individuals (Brodie, 2008). This perspective also places a strong emphasis on individuals managing their own problems through responsibility and self-regulation (Gotell, 2010). In other words, by redirecting focus away from broader systems of power and oppression, neoliberalism effectively obscures structural issues and concentrates solely on individual behaviour.

Over the past 40 years, neoliberal ideologies have become increasingly dominant in Canada and other Western nations (Collier, 2008). In our coding, this influence of neoliberalism was evident in two primary ways. First, there was a recurring silence around the role of broader structures in shaping experiences of, and responses to violence. Instead, resources often framed violence as an issue that occurs solely between individuals, detached from systemic or structural contexts. Second, narratives promoting individual responsibility for safety were prevalent. Similarly, solutions to violence were frequently reactive, focusing on individual responses after violence occurred rather than addressing prevention through systemic change. Each of these findings reflect common neoliberal discourse.

How Does it Operate & Connection to Violence

Neoliberal ideologies have fundamentally shaped how society perceives and responds to violence. They reinforce the view that violence is purely an individual problem rather than a structural issue embedded within broader systems of power and oppression. This perspective also exacerbates the strain on the anti-violence sector, which is increasingly expected to support survivors, advocate for systemic change, and manage daily crises, all while navigating resource scarcity and short-term, project-based funding cycles (Evans, 2005). This expectation to do more with less, coupled with funding uncertainty, ultimately “undermines our collective energy to make structural change” (Sinclair, 2003, p. 83). Gotell (2010) elaborates on the specific impacts of neoliberalism on anti-violence work, describing how policy frameworks focus on individualized victims rather than systemic causes. She explains:

Now preoccupied with the rights of individualized ‘victims’, new policy discourses avoid systemic constructions linking ‘crime’ to context, signaling the disappearance of gendered policy discourses of sexual violence. The withdrawal of funding from feminist front-line and activist work is a crucial aspect of this reconfigured context. With the decline of federal support for Canadian women’s organizations, funding for anti-rape activism and front-line work has been decentralized to the provinces. Because new funding arrangements are increasingly contingent on the provision of services to generic victims of crime, feminist front-line organizations have had to redefine themselves as social service delivery agencies, affecting their capacity to intervene in national debate and to combat the pervasive re-privatization and individualization of sexualized violence (p. 9–10).

This shift in focus from systemic change to service provision demonstrates how neoliberalism has redirected organizational priorities, weakening the ability of feminist and anti-violence organizations to advocate for broader structural change. As the quote above illustrates, this shift has also altered the discourse of SGBV to center on individual traits and behaviours while minimizing societal and systemic contexts (see also Fraser & Seymour, 2017). Specifically, neoliberalism has weakened, if not eliminated, gendered policy discourses which connect sexual violence to broader systems and contexts of, for example, patriarchy, cisheteronormativity, and **misogyny**.

We echo Billingsley’s (2019) call to place responsibility where it belongs: on state policies that perpetuate and deepen inequities that fuel SGBV, instead of limiting our focus to the micro or meso level. While this shift in perspective is challenging,

especially given the paucity of resources, Fraser and Seymour (2017) remind us that “ignoring the theoretical and the political is not a viable position for anti-oppressive practitioners” (p. 28). To drive lasting change, we must expand our view to address the structural forces that perpetuate violence and inequality.

Spotlight: Classism

To define classism, it is first necessary to briefly discuss class and its implications in the Canadian context. The concept of class is complex and beyond the scope of this document to fully explore. For the purposes of this discussion, we define class as the tenuous social relationships which develop historically and which emerge from a series of pressures characteristic of **capitalism** itself (Burton, 2022). Broadly speaking, class is often understood as a position within a social hierarchy determined by criteria such as income, education, and occupation (Burton, 2022). This socioeconomic status profoundly shapes our experiences and the opportunities available to us (see Little, 2016). Despite its significant impact, many Canadians fail to recognize the influence class has on their lives. A recent study found that most Canadians believe “hard work, education, and ambition contribute to success far more than class background” (McMaster, 2023, para. 2). This perception reflects the neoliberal ideology discussed earlier, which focuses on individual responsibility while obscuring the systemic structures that shape these outcomes.

Classism, then, is “a form of personal bias or prejudice, or a pattern of institutional discrimination, based on social class and typically directed against persons or groups of lower socioeconomic status” (Munro, 2024). Like other forms of oppression, classism is deeply interconnected with systemic inequalities, including gender inequalities, both of which underpin SGBV (WAGE, 2024b). Although SGBV affects people across all classes, poverty increases the risk and exacerbates its consequences. For example, individuals living in poverty may remain in abusive relationships due to economic dependence or face barriers to seeking help, such as limited access to phones, computers, or transportation (Morris, 2016).

Unfortunately, solutions to SGBV often focus solely on financial support, perpetuating the narrative that escaping poverty will resolve the violence. This perspective perpetuates neoliberal ideologies, ignoring systemic inequalities and shifting the responsibility to individuals to “fix” their economic and/or social circumstances. Neoliberal approaches to “solving” SGBV fail to account for the ways in which classism is deeply connected to racism as well as misogyny.¹⁵ While classism can operate as an independent form of oppression, it often intersects with other forms of oppression and thrives under neoliberal governance. During our coding process, we observed this interplay frequently, particularly in discussions where monetary solutions were proposed as standalone solutions. For this reason, classism is addressed in this section alongside neoliberalism.

¹⁵ For a clear overview of the connections between classism, racism, and misogyny, read Bhatti and Merritt’s brief paper here: <https://www.bu.edu/antiracism-center/files/2022/06/Classism.pdf>

White Supremacy (D)

White Supremacy Defined¹⁶

In the broadest sense, **White supremacy** sets up Whiteness as the human ideal (DiAngelo, 2022). More specifically, it refers to the belief that **White** people are superior to non-White people and should maintain political, social, and economic dominance (KC et al., 2021).

To ground this discussion, it is important to state clearly that race is not a biological fact, but a socially constructed system of classification designed to organize people into hierarchies of power (Fraser & Seymour, 2017). Although race does not exist in a scientific sense, racism is very real in its effects—shaping access to resources, safety, credibility, and justice.

With this understanding, defining *racism* and racialization shifts our focus from identity to process, helping us see how White supremacy operates as a system rather than a set of individual beliefs. Racism is a specific type of discrimination and oppression that targets subordinated ethnic groups based on the socially constructed category of ‘race’. Racist assumptions are often made that race and ethnicity are fixed, predetermined “biological realities” (Fraser & Seymour, 2017, p. 37). Although the meaning given to race has continually changed over time and across geographical locations, it is based on a subjective selection of certain human traits rather than biological reality.

For this reason, “‘race’ is in fact more accurately understood as an outcome of ‘racialization’” (Egale Canada & Enchanté Network, 2024, p. 16). *Racialization* refers to the process whereby people “attach racial

meanings to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice or group” (Hill Collins, 2000, p. 75). For instance, racialization involves assigning importance to human traits relating to appearance, ancestry, and/or culture in order to rationalize the concept of ‘race’. The underlying motive behind racialization is the belief in inherent differences among humans, which justify creating racial groups and categorizing people into those groups (Egale Canada & Enchanté Network, 2024).

White supremacy, then, extends beyond overt acts of racism or individual prejudices. It is a systemic and pervasive framework and socioeconomic system that grants White people disproportionate control over power, resources, and societal narratives, both materially and ideologically (Faculty of Education, n.d.; Mirpuri, 2022). In a White supremacist system, White people benefit from structural advantages, entitlements, and rights that other racial and ethnic groups do not, at both collective and individual levels

(Sinclair, 2003). These benefits include land ownership, political representation, and differential treatment in the criminal justice and legal systems, to name a few (Mirpuri, 2022). While racism can refer to individual acts as well as a broader system that systematically disadvantages racialized groups, White supremacy is a largely invisible system conferring dominance, privileges, and numerous entitlements to White people (Sinclair, 2003). In a working paper entitled “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack”, Peggy McIntosh notes: “[W]hite privilege [is] an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was ‘meant’ to remain

¹⁶ Although White supremacy, racism and systemic racism are often used interchangeably, these terms refer to different processes. However, “they are all connected by the ways in which they prop up whiteness as a dominant and racial “otherness” as submissive” (Mirpuri, 2022, p. 2).

oblivious” (McIntosh, 1988 in Sinclair, 2003, p. 112).

How Does it Operate?

At its core, Whiteness functions as a socially constructed, yet deeply embedded, system of dominance in Canadian society (Sinclair, 2003). This system normalizes White superiority and entitlement, maintaining structures of racial dominance and the perpetuation of racial discrimination across institutions such as education, healthcare, social services (including GBV services), the criminal justice system, and media (Hoselton & Walsh, 2023; Ugwuegbula, 2020; Boyer, 2017; Reece, 2020). This discrimination is demonstrated through Whitewashed curriculum, unjust treatment in the healthcare system (i.e., forced sterilization practices of Indigenous women), over-policing, and mass incarceration of racialized communities (Ugwuegbula, 2020; Boyer, 2017; Reece, 2020). Evidently, White supremacy intersects with other systems of oppression such as sexism, heteropatriarchy, classism, and colonialism to compound oppressions experienced by racialized groups (Canadian Human Rights Commission, 2023).

In the Canadian context, White supremacy is rooted in the country’s colonial history, where the establishment of a White settler state depended on the genocide, enslavement, dehumanization, and systemic oppression of Indigenous Peoples, as well as the exploitation and marginalization of Black communities, Chinese immigrants, Japanese Canadians, and other racialized groups (KC et al., 2021). These beliefs justified policies such as the Residential School system, the Indian Act, and exclusionary immigration laws, which were specifically designed to bolster White European dominance. The legacy of these initiatives persist today, seeping into institutions, cultural narratives, and everyday

interactions (Canadian Human Rights Commission, 2023).

When conducting our critical discourse analysis (CDA) coding of resources, we saw very few resources explicitly call out White supremacy. One resource even overtly Othered or lumped together racialized people’s experiences without applying an intersectional lens. Our findings show how insidious White supremacy is, which makes it all the more difficult to change. Further, reflecting on how one benefits from White privilege may elicit feelings of guilt, which can in turn lead to avoidance and silence on issues regarding racism or other oppressions (Sinclair, 2003).

Connections to Violence

White supremacy and racism are deeply intertwined with SGBV, as both systems of oppression are rooted in power, control, and dehumanization. The hierarchical ideology of White supremacy involves the objectification and subjugation of non-White people. SGBV, particularly against Black, Indigenous, and racialized women, becomes a tool of maintaining these oppressive power structures; rape, sexual assault, and other forms of gendered violence were—and still are—used as weapons of colonization and slavery, aiming to assert dominance over subjugated communities and control their bodies and autonomy (Armstrong et al., 2018; Smith, 2015). Within White supremacist logic, White, heterosexual sexuality is normalized while Black, Indigenous and racialized women’s sexuality is cast as inherently deviant and is simultaneously fetishized and pathologized (Hill Collins, 2000; Gilchrist, 2010). Hill Collins’ and other Black feminists’ work outlines how the “jezebel” and “hot momma” archetypes become racialized, gendered symbols of deviant female sexuality.

Recalling the work of Crenshaw (1991), these racist stereotypes construct Black women as inherently promiscuous, which creates a culture of silence and permissibility around racialized women's experiences of SGBV. Indeed, the hypersexualization of Black and Indigenous women has historically (and to this day) justified their exploitation and abuse, reinforcing White supremacy's control over their bodies (Gilchrist, 2010).

Additionally, and as we'll see in an upcoming section, Black, Indigenous and other racialized 2SLGBTQIA+ people are targeted for violence at higher rates due to intersecting forms of racist and **cisheterosexist** discrimination. The continued prevalence of White supremacy within the legal system, media, and education systems perpetuates the normalization of violence against racialized groups, making it harder for survivors to seek justice or for systemic change to take place. These interlocking systems of oppression ensure that SGBV is not only a tool of White supremacy but also a means of perpetuating its very existence.

Dismantling White supremacy requires an anti-racist, anti-oppressive approach (ARAO) which not only understands how values, ideologies and practices in SGBV organizations and workplaces have been influenced by dominant Western cultures but also actively challenges the assumption that these are the best and only ways of being (Jones & Okun, 2001). Further, addressing White supremacy requires an intersectional approach to SGBV, recognizing the distinct ways that SGBV impacts racialized survivors.

Patriarchy (E)

Patriarchy Defined

Patriarchy is another root cause of SGBV, impacting us individually and collectively. Patriarchy is a structure, system, and ideology; it is not just about individual behaviour (McKee, 2014). That said, an individual's misogynistic or violent behaviour is often a reflection of broader patriarchal attitudes and values condoned or normalized within Canadian society. Patriarchy refers to a social system in which males¹⁷ are the primary authority figures at the center of social organization, political leadership, morality, control of property and where fathers hold authority over women and children. It is based on the belief that males and people socialized as men do (and should) have power and dominance over females and folks socialized as women. In other words, patriarchy is predicated on power imbalances, oppression, and control.

These tenets of patriarchy are distinct from those of a matriarchy, a social system in which women hold positions of authority and importance *without* violence and domination. In a broader sense, matriarchies are systems in which women hold moral authority, enjoy various social privileges, and have control of property (i.e., land tenureship). Although matriarchies have existed around the world at different times through history, patriarchy has become the dominant global power model through colonization¹⁸ (Tremblay et al., 2016).

¹⁷ Here, we are referring specifically to cisgender, heterosexual males.

¹⁸ In recalling the section on colonialism, we can more clearly see the linkages between colonization and patriarchy. For further reading, please read Riane Eisler's book, *The Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future*. This book on systems of domination speaks to the gendered origins of what she calls "dominator cultures."

How Does it Operate?

Many credit the notion of patriarchy to Friedrich Engels, a German philosopher who argued that men needed to control women's behavior and sex lives to know who their children were, and thus know who to pass their property onto (Engels, 1884/2001). Therefore, a key way men maintained power and control over women was to pass their property to their sons.

Patriarchy reifies and ensures its own survival by denying, dismissing, trivializing, and/or negating women and gender diverse people's unequal status in society (Sinclair, 2003, p. 82-3). Similar to the other systems of oppression we have discussed so far, denial and erasure are key mechanisms by which patriarchy continues to persist despite years of efforts toward equalizing the political, economic, and social realities of women and gender diverse people. As Charlotte Higgins notes, "patriarchy's particular power is its capacity to make itself as invisible as possible; it tries very hard not to draw attention to the means of its endurance" (Stout, 2019, Patriarchy is invisible and all-encompassing, para 1). Specifically, patriarchy presents itself as natural and unchangeable: this presentation of itself as the "natural" order of things (the status quo) is what makes it not only a social system but also an ideology. This status quo includes condoning, ignoring, or minimizing men's violence against women, normalizing men's control of decision-making (in both public and personal domains), adhering to rigid gender roles and identities, and normalizing "male peer relations that emphasize aggression and disrespect towards women" (Crooks et al., 2019, p. 24). We often hear this reflected in phrases like "boys will be boys," which reflects a complacency toward widespread sexism and misogyny as well as an incorrect belief that sexism and misogyny

exist on a spectrum. As Pitman (2018) in Sharoni (2018) argues:

"misogyny isn't a sliding scale of harm where jokes are situated at the low end and rape at the other. Rather, it functions like a human pyramid, where minor acts support the major by providing, at best, a foundation of blithe indifference, and at worst an atmosphere of amusement at the denigration of women" (p. 146).

In other words, denying or trivializing misogynistic jokes, for example, creates a discursive and social system that supports more egregious acts of violence, since all forms of violence share a common root of oppression and control (see [SGBV & Language](#) section for a discussion on how language upholds rape culture).

Another way in which patriarchy-like other structures of oppression and domination—retains and ensures its survival is by convincing individuals and society more broadly that change can only be effected by groups and that individual solutions aren't enough to achieve broad social change (Sinclair, 2003). In reality, and as we argue throughout this Guidebook, dismantling patriarchal oppression and misogyny require multifaceted solutions at both individual and structural levels.

Sometimes, patriarchy—particularly in Western contexts—makes itself invisible by conflating SGBV with "culture" and as only occurring "elsewhere." We see this in media discourse concerning, for example, honour killings, domestic violence rates, women's labour force participation, or rules concerning women's public appearance. Canada is often cast as non-patriarchal and "free" of SGBV while other countries and cultures are constructed as being "backward" and oppressive to women (Rentschler, 2022). This is a clear example of

how patriarchy and racism intersect to shape dominant discourses surrounding SGBV. The less visible and distant patriarchy can make itself, the more it is able to continue shaping social systems and how we interact with each other.

Connection to Violence

Patriarchal ideologies and systems are in a dynamic relationship to SGBV. The violence that patriarchy creates and allows for is both explicitly and tacitly permitted in our legal codes, law enforcement, social customs, and certain religious teachings (Kaufman, 1999). Within a patriarchal ideology, violence against women is used as an attempt to gain and/or reinforce power or control (McKee, 2014). While the global prevalence of male violence towards women is evidence of direct patriarchal practices by individual men, the response to this violence from social, legal, and educational institutions shows how patriarchal violence is structurally sustained (McKee, 2014). Indeed, male violence is an outcome of the “structural inequalities that exist between men and women” as well as men’s sense of entitlement to the privileges they enjoy as a result of these inequalities (Sinclair, 2003, p. 17; Kaufman, 1999). These inequalities include pay gaps (which in turn may lead to financial dependence on abusive male partners); penalties related to becoming a parent (e.g., “the mommy track”), and differences in expectations of, and time invested in reproductive labour such as child-rearing and household tasks (see [Arora & Kumari, 2022](#)).

Importantly, patriarchal ideologies legitimize not only men’s violence against women and gender diverse people but also violence *between* men, especially against men who do not fit dominant ideals of masculinity (e.g., cisgender, able-bodied, heterosexual,

and embodying hegemonic expectations of masculinity such as being ‘strong’ and ‘unemotional’) (Graaff, 2021). It is for these reasons that scholars argue that the process of proving or defending one’s masculinity, adhering to masculinity norms, or challenging others’ masculinity, is often at the core of male violence (Connell, 2000; Fleming et al., 2015).

As noted earlier, a core feature of patriarchy is domination. This includes domination of men over women, of strong over weak, and of masculine (and what is ‘coded’ as masculine) over feminine (and what is ‘coded’ as feminine). An aspect of patriarchy is giving privilege to masculinity and male identities, while devaluing femininity and female identities (OCRCC, 2012). Beyond this binary division, men are further hierarchically categorized, where heterosexual, cisgender, non-disabled men from dominant racial and cultural groups hold the most sociopolitical power and retain that power over other men through violence or threatening violence (Kaufman, 1999). This is how patriarchy exerts control over women and gender diverse people’s bodies and choices, as well as men who do not meet the patriarchal “ideal” (NWAC, n.d.). We’ll get into this more in the section on **(Cis)heteronormativity**, but privileging masculinity is also connected to privileging cisgender and heterosexual identities and people while devaluing other sexual orientations, gender identities, and gender expressions.

This devaluation of anything and anyone perceived to be female, feminine or feminized reinforces sexual violence; for example, there is a strong stigma against boys and men who experience sexual violence, due to the perceived shame and ‘feminisation’ of being a male survivor of sexual violence. This shame illustrates how sexual violence is extremely

gendered and also highlights how not just females but anyone who is 'coded' as feminine (e.g., gender non-conforming men) are subject to domination within the structural gender inequalities demanded by patriarchal norms (see [Fleming et al., 2015](#)). Indeed, Connell (2000) notes that the hierarchization of masculinities within a patriarchal social system "is itself a source of violence, since force is used in defining and maintaining the hierarchy" (p. 217). Consequently, it is important to understand the structure and ideology of patriarchy vis-a-vis other forms of hierarchy to understand the complex power dynamics with patriarchal systems (see Hunnicutt, 2009).

Anti-Feminist Backlash

A common theme that we've noted is that domination is a core feature of patriarchy. Sinclair (2003) explains patriarchal domination as:

an ideological understanding of men as the purveyors of knowledge and rationality in society. Therefore, any counter-discourse, or experience that threatens the dominant order or ideology, is met with resistance and backlash (p. 21).

Broadly, backlash is "a strong or violent reaction to some social change often provoked by fear or prejudice of certain groups" (Sinclair, 2003 p. 23). Anti-feminist backlash is a historical trend that generally resurfaces when it seems that women are making progress towards their goal of achieving equality (Flood et al., 2020). It operates formally and informally, at the individual and systemic levels, using tactics such as denial of the problem, disavowal of responsibility, inaction, co-option and repression (Flood et al., 2020).

For example, a key tactic of discrediting women's experiences of SGBV is to diminish the harms of SGBV that do not fit the paradigm of violent physical attacks and narrowing the definition of what constitutes "real" rape or other form of SGBV (see [Rentschler, 2022](#)). In this line of argumentation, sexual harassment and other forms of SGBV are not as significant or problematic as feminists make them out to be (Rentschler, 2022). As Sinclair (2003) notes, we often see backlash "in attempts to silence women's voices by discrediting various women's movements and by re-victimizing women in the courts or via the media" (p.21). Regardless of the specific methods used by those supporting or reinforcing a backlash, the common denominator is that backlash always pushes toward the status quo.

Given that patriarchal ideologies and structures have been around for millennia, it can be easy to frame patriarchy as something that's "in the past." However, as illustrated by recent backlash to the #MeToo movement and the ensuing rise of the "manosphere," patriarchy is as potent and widespread as ever. The manosphere is a loose collection of anti-feminist movements marked by their overt and extreme misogyny. It is one subset of a broader alt-right ideology—as well as a key example of backlash—which incorporates homophobia, heterosexism, misogyny, sexism, and racism. Racialized women, 2SLGBTQIA+ people, Indigenous women, and Black women are at disproportionate risk from this racist and misogynist movement. Groups within the manosphere include 'involuntary celibates' or 'Incels'—an online "brotherhood" of men who are unsuccessful in finding a romantic partner despite attempts and therefore harbour extreme feelings of misogyny and hatred for women (KC et al., 2021). An incel was behind the 2018 Toronto

van attack that killed 11 people (9 of whom were women) and critically injured another 15 people. The attack has been characterized as “misogynist terrorism” because it was motivated by revenge for perceived sexual and social rejection by women (Boy, 2018).

The aim of these anti-feminist, alt-right movements is to derail the important gains which have been made on human rights, women’s rights, anti-racism, 2SLGBTQIA+ rights, and Indigenous peoples’ rights. This is because their logic is: “Whatever needs to be done to keep the status quo in place, will be done” (Sinclair, 2003, p. 23). They point to the progress on human rights, equality, diversity, and inclusion as damaging to White men’s identity, and they deploy fear and violence to counter it (KC et al., 2021). As it relates to SGBV specifically, anti-feminist proponents adhere to four key claims:

1. Rape culture does not exist, and feminists who say it does are hysterical¹⁹;
2. Feminist claims about rape culture endanger free speech;
3. Women are to blame for sexual violence, and men are victims of the idea of rape culture; and,
4. If rape culture does exist, it is only outside of Canada (Rentschler, 2022, p. 652).

Concerning the first claim, the discourse of “feminist hysteria” about sexual violence taps into a long history of pathologizing all women, but especially feminists, of being hysterical and thus not to be believed or taken seriously. Concerning the third claim, anti-feminists claim that men are now victims of gender discrimination given women’s gains in achieving equality in various spheres of social

life; importantly, this logic inaccurately frames advancement as a zero-sum game. Also concerning the third claim, if women are to blame for sexual violence, they are in effect, as Hill Collins (1990) explains, twice victimized: firstly by experiencing SGBV, and secondly by being blamed for their own victimization by family members, communities, and institutions like the criminal justice system. In purporting these claims, misogynists and anti-feminists attack women and feminism rather than the patriarchal system that harms women, gender diverse people, and men.

Other forms of anti-feminist backlash are evident in the widespread influence of postfeminist and neoliberal ideologies. Postfeminism, in particular, acts as a tool of anti-feminist backlash by claiming that gender equality has already been achieved, casting doubt on whether feminism is still necessary or relevant (Goodkind & Cheng, 2021). This narrative obscures systemic inequalities and shifts attention away from collective action towards a focus on the individual, implying that “any remaining inequalities [are] not the result of sexism but of natural differences and/or of women’s own choices” (Banet-Weiser et al., 2019, p. 5). In doing so, it undermines feminism by blaming women for any continued inequalities they face, rather than recognizing systemic barriers. Neoliberalism reinforces this backlash by similarly “displacing blame from systems and onto individuals, thereby sustaining an unjust status quo” (Goodkind & Cheng, 2021, p. 759; Flood et al., 2020).

Neoliberal thinking promotes the idea that self-improvement and personal development are sufficient to overcome barriers and erases the existence of broader systemic oppression. In the anti-violence sector, we

¹⁹ The term “hysterical” has its roots in a long history of misogynist medical practices that were used to dismiss, explain, and control women’s behaviours and experiences (see McVean, 2017).

often see these ideologies show up in victim-blaming discourses, such as questioning why a survivor “didn’t just say no more firmly,” or believing that “if they had a better job, they wouldn’t experience violence.” Recognizing and challenging these narratives is crucial to resisting this backlash, and as part of anti-oppressive practice.

What we saw

While our critical discourse analysis (CDA) found only one resource for service providers that reinforced or reflected **anti-feminist backlash**, it is important to highlight this form of oppression in order to develop tools to counter it. In our practice and work as SGBV service providers, it is useful to remember that backlash is most intense when women (or any equity-deserving group, for that matter) have recently made a gain in efforts to obtain equal rights (see Sharoni, 2018); it is in these swells of backlash that anti-oppressive practice becomes especially critical.

In the resources we collected, we also found that the reliance on education as a solution to SGBV and minimizing or invisibilizing perpetrators in discussions of SGBV were the most common ways in which resources reflected patriarchal discourse and ideology. While none of the resources were explicitly condoning patriarchal ideologies, these forms of invisibilization and silence on patriarchal beliefs about men’s power and control over women exemplify how insidiously patriarchal ideologies can seep into texts. As we note throughout this Guidebook, it’s important to pay attention not only to what is said or done—whether in practice or in research or writing—but also to what is *not* said or done.

(Cis)heteronormativity and (Cis)heterosexism (G)

(Cis)heteronormativity and (cis)heterosexism defined

Heteronormativity is, essentially, the “institutionalization of heterosexuality” (Fraser & Seymour, 2017, p. 39) and is embedded in discourse at individual and structural levels (Herek, 1984). Although it shows up in many ways, simply put, it is the dominant story we are told about what constitutes “normal” and “ideal” sexuality and sexual expression (Tremblay et al., 2016). Heteronormativity has similarly been defined as a cultural bias in favour of opposite-sex/opposite-gender relationships (Rainbow Resource Centre, 2012). Heteronormative biases are reflected in the under-representation of same sex/gender couples in advertising and entertainment media; religious biases to not marry same sex/gender couples or accept same-sex/gender couples into religious communities; as well as everyday speech such as assuming the gender or pronoun of one’s intimate partner (Rainbow Resource Centre, 2012). A related concept, cisheteronormativity, describes a system of oppression in which binary gender, heterosexuality, and the idea that people live in the gender that was assigned to them at birth are naturalized and privileged (Dean et al., 2016).

(Cis)heterosexism is rooted in *(cis) heteronormativity*, which is the social context that normalizes and validates being cisgender and heterosexual (and, in turn, frames being transgender, gender diverse, or not heterosexual as being abnormal or “less than”). *(Cis)heterosexism* itself is the prejudiced belief that being cisgender and/or heterosexual is the “normal” way to be, and that heterosexuals and those

who identify with their sex assigned at birth are socially and culturally superior to **2SLGBTQIA+** people (Dean et al., 2016). The cisheterosexist bias that cisheterosexuality is inherently superior to any other sexual or gender expressions justifies the domination of cisheterosexual individuals and communities (Hill Collins, 2000). Together, (cis)heteronormativity and (cis)heterosexism are structures of oppression enacted in ways that exclude, erase, dismiss, and stigmatize 2SLGBTQIA+ people. Within this system of oppression, prejudice against 2SLGBTQIA+ sexual and gender identities, desires, and behaviour is condoned, normalized, and invisibilized, leading to a range of physical and mental health disparities as well as heightened risks for experiencing SGBV within these communities. Researchers studying 2SLGBTQIA+ health disparities often use the term “minority stress” to describe the harmful effects of having to chronically deal with cisheteronormativity and cisheterosexism (Meyer, 2003). Examples of these stressors experienced by 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals can include criminal victimization (e.g., hate crimes); discriminatory legislation that denies these communities equal access to, for example, marriage and associated privileges; family rejection; workplace discrimination; and lack of acceptance of 2SLGBTQIA+ identity or behaviours in everyday interactions (Hoy-Ellis, 2023).

How does it operate?

Just as we noted when describing other systems of oppression, assumptions of heterosexuality operate as a hegemonic ideology, which normalizes heterosexuality and deems other sexualities as deviant (Hill Collins, 2000). The same process also applies to gender identities, where being cisgender is positioned as the norm and

being transgender or gender diverse is deemed as “deviant” and is consequently politically, socially, legally, and economically marginalized and oppressed (Tan et al., 2020). Heterosexism devalues and erases non-heterosexual identities and relationships, perpetuating stigma and creating societal barriers for 2SLGBTQIA+ people (Lorenzetti et al., 2017). Cisheterosexism promotes oppressive gender myths, enforces conformity to gender norms (e.g., ideas about what femininity and masculinity are, who should perform them and how they should be performed), and entrenches violence against non-conforming persons or groups.

We will discuss intersectionality in a forthcoming section, but it is important here to recognize that heteronormativity can be analyzed as a distinct system of oppression as well as a form of oppression that occurs within particular genders or ethnicities (Hill Collins, 2000). Further, and as the next section highlights, patriarchy and heteronormativity work together to enforce and normalize gender and sexual power imbalances that marginalize and dehumanize cisgender women and 2SLGBTQIA+ people. The connection between these two systems of oppression is evident in how patriarchy reinforces the subordination of women as well as those with “weaker” masculinities, such as gay or bisexual men (see [Girshick, 2002](#)). However, as Bermea et al. (2019) outline, it is important to recognize that the patriarchal privilege and dynamics of power and control that are often inherent in male-to-female perpetrated violence may take different forms in queer relationships. For example, one form of GBV that is unique to queer relationships is the abuser threatening to “out” a closeted partner, knowing that this will cause them harm.

Connection to violence

(Cis)heteronormativity has a direct relationship to violence, in that it both explains, and is at the root of prejudice and hostility towards same-sex or queer desires, identities, and behaviours. Heteronormativity, heterosexism and sexual stigma coalesce to create a climate of structural violence which negatively impacts the economic, legal, cultural and social aspects of 2SLGBTQQIA+ people's lives (Lorenzetti et al., 2017). This climate of structural anti-2SLGBTQQIA+ violence creates additional risk factors for SGBV, including the imposition of traditional gender and sexuality norms, experienced (and anticipated) stigma, harassment, social exclusion, and lack of appropriate and tailored SGBV prevention services and supports for 2SLGBTQQIA+ people (Lorenzetti et al., 2017).

In addition to cisheteronormativity directly leading to violence against 2SLGBTQQIA+ individuals, it also has the effect of invisibilizing and silencing instances and patterns of SGBV *within* 2SLGBTQQIA+ dynamics and communities. As Ristock (2011) observes, "when same-sex violence is considered, it is most commonly as an 'add on', without close attention to the specificity and meaning of violence within the lives of [2SLGBTQQIA+ individuals]" (p. 2). Indeed, 2SLGBTQQIA+ people may be reluctant to report domestic or intimate partner violence to authorities due to the belief that "being victimized by their partners is less frightening than being victimized by the system" (Murray & Mobley, 2009, p. 364). Further, policies and practices within the SGBV sector are largely grounded in heterosexist paradigms, which results in a lack of awareness and support from service providers and in services that are inadequate and exclusionary to 2SLGBTQQIA+ survivors (see Lorenzetti et al., 2017). (Cis)heteronormative ideologies

punish 2SLGBTQQIA+ people for not fitting into normative gender roles; one form of punishment is being denied services that can provide safety and

well-being in the wake of experiencing SGBV (Bermea et al., 2019). A clear example of this is women's shelters refusing to take in trans clients. Another example on how heteronormative oppression impacts direct service delivery is that if service providers already view same-gender relationships as inherently illegitimate or unhealthy, survivors are more likely to be dismissed, preventing them from accessing necessary services and keeping them in a dangerous situation (Bermea et al., 2019).

Although there are a lot of overlapping risk factors for SGBV in both queer and heterosexual intimate partnerships, Lorenzetti et al.'s (2017) overview of existing research suggests that there are five additional domestic violence risk factors facing 2SLGBTQQIA+ survivors:

- (1) heterosexism and sexual stigma
- (2) traditional gender and sexuality norms
- (3) early stigma and homophobic harassment
- (4) social exclusion and isolation through the lifespan, and
- (5) lack of safe, accessible and appropriate domestic violence prevention services and supports.

What we saw

While no resources that were coded using critical discourse analysis (CDA) normalized power imbalances on the basis of sex, gender, or gender expression, and only one source was notably silent on how 2SLGBTQQIA+ relationships can be sites of replicating oppressive structures, a couple of resources

emphasized heterosexual relationships while remaining silent concerning both the existence of 2SLGBTQIA+ relationships as well as the ways in which SGBV manifests in, for example, couples of the same sex. As noted earlier, these biases have devastating real-life consequences, including invisibilization of intimate partners or dating violence between two people of the same sex or in queer relationships more broadly. In another resource we coded, Bermea et al. (2019) suggest that organizations examine their own policies to ensure they do not replicate heterosexism and homophobia and to help 2SLGBTQIA+ survivors identify if, and how, (cis)heteronormativity has shaped their experiences (see p. 540). Quite a few resources visibilized heteronormativity as a form of oppression: for example, Crooks et al. (2019) outline that prevailing heteronormative biases lead to the inaccurate assumption that violence only occurs in heterosexual relationships. Together, these findings emphasize the importance of explicitly challenging (cis)heteronormative assumptions in both policy and practice to ensure all survivors' experiences are recognized, validated and addressed.



Section III:

Anti-Oppression

The need for an anti-oppressive approach to
SGBV prevention and interventions

What is anti-oppressive practice?

Section III: Anti-Oppression

The need for an anti-oppressive approach to SGBV prevention and interventions

The previous section has focused on what oppression is and the various systems through which it is created, reinforced, and maintained. The harms these various structures and systems of oppression create, not only for individuals but also entire communities, present a clear need for anti-oppressive approaches to SGBV interventions and prevention efforts. As we've stated at the outset, our sector tends to be reactive, but we need to prevent—not simply react to—SGBV in order to end it. A key way to prevent SGBV is to build a culture that actively dismantles the systems of oppression that sustain and allow for SGBV to continue (OCRCC, 2012). A critical starting point is education. However, optional, sporadic, or asynchronous training and education without making a commitment to ongoing accountability will have limited success; as Dale et al. (2021) note, “education and training can be bottomless pits without results-based attention to institutional change”(p.121). Instead, we need to activate our anti-oppression training and education through shifts in our attitudes, behaviours, political engagement, and activism (Wilkin & Hillock, 2014). These efforts are necessary to become safe(r) service providers, and aid in our work to end SGBV. We hope as you move through the next sections of this Guidebook, it will provide both theoretical background and practical strategies to implement these shifts.

It's also important to recognize that learning about anti-oppressive practice does not

immediately translate into systemic change. Undoing centuries of learned behaviour and deeply embedded ways of thinking will take time. However, this work must start now. Each intentional shift in practice matters, creating ripple effects that, over time, can build toward meaningful and transformative change.

Another critical step toward this long-term change is reshaping the cultures of organizations within our sector and other service settings to explicitly challenge the deeply-rooted racism and White supremacy within the anti-violence sector (MacDougall et al., 2022). As we've stated earlier in this Guidebook, changing organizational culture and practice approaches to be anti-oppressive also involves de-individualizing clients' concerns, and instead contextualizing them within broader issues like poverty and racism. Indeed, politicizing a client's problem by framing it as a consequence of living in a capitalist neoliberal society marked by intersecting oppressions rather than framing it as an individual shortcoming makes it easier to address the problem, since we can recognize it as a *pattern* (see Baines, 2011). Anti-oppressive practice also calls on us to understand others' experiences on their terms rather than through the lens of our own experiences (CICMH, 2022). Making these changes involves reflexivity, accountability (e.g., acknowledging and working to address personal biases), and making tangible changes in policies and process (e.g., offering Indigenous-led healing modalities; drawing on knowledge bases beyond Western, Eurocentric sources for ongoing education and staff capacity-building; and providing anti-racism training to new hires). MacDougall et al. (2022) argue that service providers should not be passively “non-oppressive”; rather,

our practice needs to be actively anti-racist, anti-colonial, anti-ableist, and anti-transphobic to rebalance power dynamics that create oppressions.

SGBV prevention efforts must also actively challenge patriarchal structures, gender norms, and emergent challenges like the “manosphere” we wrote about earlier. These prevention efforts should engage men and boys as allies, promoting mentorship and models of positive forms of masculinity (EVA Canada, 2021). Doing so would involve critical reflection on intersecting forms of oppression (e.g., patriarchy itself, racism, cisheterosexism, and ableism) which are at the root of not only violence against women and gender diverse people, but also between men.

Finally, we need shifts in SGBV research, prevention, and intervention. We need to move away from seeing and treating issues at only an individual, case-by-case level to focus on structures and patterns that give rise to SGBV (e.g., gender norms and expectations). SGBV does not emerge spontaneously; rather, it is the outcome of circumstances and social conditions that enable—and even encourage—it to occur (Fraser & Seymour, 2017). Consequently, we need to truly start accounting for the ways in which oppressive structures “touch down” in people’s lives, impacting both their experiences of SGBV and the resources they have available to them to heal (e.g., financial, social, and psychological). Rather than top-down, hierarchical approaches led by academics or health care professionals, we need SGBV policies and programming that are person-centred, community-guided, and anti-oppressive. In practice, this means valuing individual clients’ uniqueness while also seeing their connections to others (e.g., interpersonal relationships with families or cultural groups) and to structure (e.g., laws, social institutions)

(see Fraser & Seymour, 2017). It also means being dedicated to—and taking responsibility for—justice at the individual, community, and structural level.

What is anti-oppressive practice?

Anti-oppressive practice (AOP) is both a theory and an approach which focuses on how systems create and maintain dominant groups’ privilege and power while creating and maintaining inequitable conditions for other groups of people (Baines, 2011). Rather than denying or ignoring power relations, AOP practitioners recognize power relations as central to and affecting all human interactions, affecting all communication, not just those formally designated as political (Baines, 2011). AOP is an umbrella term referring to “new practices, new sources for and ways of understanding and building knowledge and practice, and new ways of building activism [which] integrate liberatory understandings of social problems and human behaviour” (Baines, 2011, p. 4). These new practices, understandings, and actions centre the experiences of equity-deserving groups in order to develop structures and systems that work for everyone rather than maintaining divisions and dichotomies (CICMH, 2022). AOP is a social justice-oriented approach to service provision, helping service providers not only understand that social inequities and inequalities are at the root of all oppression, but also providing them tools to fight for change (Baines, 2011). In an AOP framework, change happens at individual, community, institutional, and systems levels; and seeks to address “violence, abuse of power, and the ways people are manipulated, limited, controlled, silenced, incarcerated and erased” (Tremblay et al., 2016, p. 1).

AOP brings together a variety of critical approaches, including feminism, decolonization theory, queer theory, anti-racist²⁰ approaches, and disability justice approaches (CICMH, 2022). Because it is part of these larger movements for social change, the politicized practices constituting AOP are constantly evolving and refining themselves to address new social problems (e.g., responding to the manosphere's anti-feminist backlash noted earlier). AOP thus requires a high degree of responsiveness, adaptability, and humility. AOP is about resisting intersecting systems of oppression, such as racism, colonialism, patriarchy, heteronormativity or other social forces (Bermea et al., 2019). AOP recognizes that each of these oppressive structures are based on power imbalances (Baines, 2011), which create social differences between dominant and subordinated groups (Burke & Harrison, 2002). Like we mentioned in our section on **State Power**, one insidious way in which dominant groups and institutions retain power is by "attempting to appear neutral and even-handed" (Baines, 2011, p. 16). However, as critical discourse analysis (CDA) contends, these power relations and associated discourses are far from neutral and have negative consequences for those who are being dominated.

In efforts to reduce the power differentials, AOP views individuals as experts in their own lives, is dedicated to shared decision-making, uses a strengths-based approach, and carefully considers how language can reinforce racist, classist, or other discriminatory ideas (Corneau & Stergiopoulos, 2012). Bernhardt and Cooper

(2022, p. 7) further identify six principles which guide AOP:

- 1) being intentional and proactive;
- 2) being accountable;
- 3) assessing your own and organizational practices and approaches on an ongoing basis;
- 4) being impact-focused (rather than intent-focused)
- 5) being structurally integrated; and
- 6) applying intersectional approaches.

Anti-oppressive practice bridges striving for structural changes and providing individualized responses to abuse and violence, all while remaining compassionate and accountable to survivors (Fraser & Seymour, 2017). This "bridging" exercise is what C. Wright Mills (1959) termed **the sociological imagination**, or being able to see and connect personal challenges to larger social issues. Developing your sociological imagination involves "drawing links between personal pain, political inequities, social policies, and economic forces" (Baines, 2011, p. 11). This is why, in the Introduction, we highlighted the importance of reflecting on our own positionality and privilege and encourage you as readers to do the same (see [Rupra, 2010](#)). Reflexively considering your social positionality, checking in with yourself to see whether your actions are consistent with your words and principles (Fraser & Seymour, 2017), and acting on the conclusions of your reflections is a great way to "activate" your sociological imagination! Further, self-reflection helps us to work in partnership with

²⁰ It is important to distinguish between being non-racist and being anti-racist: Being non-racist is passive; it simply means not holding prejudiced beliefs or directly engaging in discriminatory behaviour based on race. Consequently, one can be non-racist while also being complicit to existing systems that perpetuate racism. By contrast, being anti-racist is an active, intentional position: "it implies a commitment to ongoing action against any instances of racism. Anti-racist persons and organizations not only refrain from participating in racist behaviour, but actively work to counteract and dismantle racism in their communities and in society at large" (Egale Canada & Enchante Network, 2024, p. 16-17).

clients, which can narrow power differences (Burke & Harrison, 2002). “Co-working” and collaborating with your clients involves meeting them where they are at and sharing power with them. This can look like actively centering the voices of clients, engaging with and empowering individuals and communities meaningfully, building a mutual understanding, being flexible and responsive to community and individual needs, as well as naming harm, if and when it occurs (Resource Sharing Project & NSVRC, 2020; Mulvale et al., 2018).

In the context of everyday service provision, AOP can include committing to deep learning (e.g., doing a positionality reflection), navigating discomfort about your own privilege and the oppressive power structures within which we are all embedded, actively and intentionally listening, understanding the impacts of individual and collective traumas, building clients’ resiliency by focusing on their strengths and capacities, fostering empowerment that is grounded in horizontal rather than exploitative power relations and remaining vigilant to not cause further exploitation and harm in service provision contexts (Adkison-Stevens & Timmons, 2018).

Beyond self-reflection and challenging your own biases, implementing AOP should also be taking place at the organizational and structural levels. Doing so is a complex process that begins by having honest and considered conversations between staff and organizational leaders about oppression and the histories that have laid the groundwork

for present-day inequities (Wilkin & Hillock, 2014). Other ways to implement AOP include dismantling practices that are oppressive (e.g., exclusionary approaches to care that privilege Western approaches to care provision);²¹ reframing concepts of leadership and organizational structures; participating in community activism and advocacy efforts;²² writing critical scholarly work; taking mass action (e.g., protests); leveraging the power and privileges of both individual service providers and organizations; as well as creating and advocating for community-based resources and spaces that are accessible, inclusive, and affirming for all people, especially folks who have been underserved or harmed by mainstream services (Adkison-Stevens & Timmons, 2018; Resource Sharing Project & NSVRC, 2020). While AOP often emphasizes dismantling systemic structures, it is important to address both systemic and individual levels when working to prevent violence.

An example of (re)creating your organization’s programming using an anti-oppressive approach would be to:

- (a) honour the intersectionality of people’s identities and experiences, where SGBV must be understood in the context of colonialism, racism, sexism, and other systemic oppressions that cause both acute and intergenerational trauma and harm;
- (b) integrate cultural values of the specific groups of individuals whom you’re serving; and,

²¹ A Western, biomedical model takes a more individualistic approach to mental health and does not include the cultural, structural, and societal factors that influence people’s mental health (Corneau & Stergiopoulos, 2012). By contrast, AOP takes a wider, upstream view of the potential causes of mental health issues by focusing more on how the power imbalances that characterize the systems and structures that we work within influence mental health and contribute to mental health outcomes (CICMH, 2022).

²² Ali and Lees (2012) provide an example of psychologists participating in advocacy by partnering with community-based groups and organizations that directly serve those living in poverty, given the compelling data indicating that mental health is intricately tied to social and economic status and that poverty is a strong predictor of poor mental health. The authors argue that such partnerships are crucial to psychological interventions aligned with broader goals of social justice.

- (c) actively dismantle stereotypes surrounding these specific groups (Adkison-Stevens & Timmons, 2018).

For instance, Fraser and Seymour (2017) provide an example of AOP being implemented among Indigenous offenders: while offenders are treated as individuals responsible for their own actions and confronted about their pain and the forces that propel them to harmful behaviour, they are also understood within a collective context of trauma experienced by Indigenous peoples in an active settler colony. An AOP approach, akin to a restorative justice approach, sees healing as not simply about addressing individual(ized) offending behaviour but is also fundamentally addressing trauma (see p. 181 in Fraser & Seymour, 2017 for more on this). Here again, we see how AOP approaches move between the “micro” and the “macro” to address oppressive structures and heal not only individual, but also collective traumas.

Coming back to our earlier point, since AOP is responsive and evolving, it is often a messy and uneven process that requires ongoing reflection, debate, and refinement (Baines, 2011). In other words, there will be a lot of times where we feel like we’ve “messed up” or “failed”, which can leave us feeling disillusioned and discouraged. Consequently, alongside adaptability and humility, self-compassion is critical when working towards AOP in your interactions and in your organizations/workplaces. Be gentle with yourself and be open to the learning and unlearning journey.

Spotlight: Trauma-Informed Practice

Anti-oppressive practice is often conflated with **trauma-informed** practice and approaches, when in fact trauma-informed

approaches are a subset of anti-oppressive practices. Anti-oppressive approaches are grounded in the understanding that oppression is pervasive—often in ways that are deeply connected to trauma—while trauma-informed approaches begin from the assumption that everyone experiences trauma. Together, these frameworks complement one another by addressing the intertwined nature of oppression and trauma.

By implementing trauma-informed approaches, we can understand and address the impact trauma has on clients, and work to minimize harm in client or community interactions. The US-based Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration has developed five key principles for trauma-informed practice (SAMHSA, 2024):

- **Safety:** This involves ensuring physical and emotional safety for others and oneself. An example of providing safer care is ensuring privacy during conversations with clients.
- **Transparency and trust:** Building trustworthiness requires transparency about all processes and stages of work with a client. An example of transparency is explaining confidentiality policies as well as other relevant organizational policies and processes.
- **Peer support:** Recognizing the role that those with lived experience have in the healing process and drawing on this role. An example of this could be to offer to connect clients to peer support models/services.
- **Choice, voice, and empowerment:** Recognizing clients’ strengths, resilience, and expertise, and allowing them to have a voice and choice in their own care, based on their priorities. Empowerment can entail analyzing the causes of

powerlessness, identifying systemic oppressive forces, and taking action to change the conditions of our lives (see Potts & Brown, 2015, p. 39). An example of empowering your clients and providing them with choice is to listen to their concerns, minimize power dynamics, and ensure that it's clear that they have autonomy in their care and healing journeys.

- **Intersectionality:** Offering responsive service based on clients' intersecting identities, basing services on an understanding of historical trauma and discrimination, and valuing cultural traditions as a form of healing. An example of providing intersectional care is creating support plans that acknowledge and address systemic and structural barriers, and, if desired, include referrals to culturally-specific organizations or peer-based services.

Systems Approach

Throughout this Guidebook, we have repeatedly noted that oppression is a systemic force that not only restricts the rights of individuals but also maintains and reinforces an unjust social order. In order to dismantle systemic forces, anti-oppressive practice (AOP) work seeks to dismantle inequities at the systems level (Corneau & Stergiopoulos, 2012). Systems approaches in AOP also require “noticing the unnoticed acts and the invisible perpetrators [and] paying attention to legitimized violence as well as the violences that are un(der)reported and left largely unpunished” (Fraser & Seymour, 2017, p. 29). Although many programs focus on individual-level factors, addressing these

factors alone is not sufficient to prevent SGBV; we need multi-level efforts to address interpersonal relationships (micro-level factors), community institutions (meso-level factors), and cultural norms (macro-level factors) (Crooks et al., 2019). Consequently, a systems approach that calls for and fights for structural, systems-level change is a key facet of AOP practices more broadly.

In contrast to **neoliberal**²³ approaches, a systems approach asserts that SGBV must be deindividualized, understood instead as occurring within (and being a result of) oppressive institutions purposefully designed to enforce settler-colonialism, racism, and capitalist accumulation (MacDougall et al., 2022). Consequently, state institutions such as police and the criminal justice system often deepen rather than alleviate the harms and trauma caused by SGBV. We also see these harmful outcomes in child welfare, mental health, housing, immigration, and other systems. These oppressive systems dehumanize and exploit many groups but especially target racialized communities, Indigenous peoples, impoverished communities, immigrants, and refugees (Montilla, 2022).

A systems approach sees an individual's experiences of violence and trauma as “unintelligible without the context of complex systemic and group disadvantage and exploitation” (Dale et al., 2021, p. 12). This does not mean that systems approaches discount individual experiences, but rather recognize that we must challenge broader systems to understand and prevent violence and trauma at both individual and collective levels. Indeed, a core argument of a systems approach is that challenging structures like

²³ An example of neoliberal ideologies infiltrating trauma discourses can be found in how Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are understood: assessments of ACEs often divorce individual experiences of trauma and adversity from structural oppression, which actively erases the systemic violence (and subsequent trauma) experienced by marginalized groups (Hoselton & Walsh, 2023).

patriarchy and colonialism (and associated social norms) are essential for preventing SGBV (see Dale et al., 2021). For instance, systems approaches resist individualizing frameworks that focus on women changing their behaviour to prevent violence rather than dismantling the structural inequalities and oppressions that make them more susceptible to experiencing violence (Graaff, 2021).

As we note in earlier sections, oppressive systems like colonialism, patriarchy, and neoliberalism hurt all of us. A systems approach rejects Western, binary frameworks that divide people into “us” versus “them”. Instead, a systems lens rejects the paradigms of these systems which seek to separate us from each other and make widespread social change feel impossible (Dale et al., 2021). The reality is that our health, safety, and

well-being are intrinsically connected, and that a world without SGBV is only possible if we not only focus on changing individual hearts and minds one at a time but also dismantling the systemic conditions that led to rampant SGBV in the first place. As the New Zealand Ministry of Justice contends, “there is no narrow pathway to eliminating [SGBV]. It will require governments, communities and specialist sectors to [...] consider all the determinants of wellbeing that contribute to safety such as housing, health, income and food security [and address] the disparities between people” (Ministry of Justice, 2021, p. 32). In other words, multi-level and intersectional change efforts are necessary to reduce—and hopefully eliminate—SGBV.

Micro/Meso/Macro (Multilevel) Approaches

As illustrated in the previous section, systems approaches to addressing SGBV require a

multilevel approach, often referred to as a micro-meso/mezzo-macro approach. Here, ‘macro-level’ refers to social structures, social forces, or social processes (e.g., capitalism); government policies; religious institutions; or financial institutions. ‘Meso-level’ refers to group or community-level factors (e.g., workplaces, organizations, or the social networks of an ethnocultural group). Finally, ‘micro-level’ refers to social processes such as everyday practices and interactions, as well as individuals’ identities, values, attitudes, and behaviours (see Baines, 2011).

Multilevel approaches account for violence at the interpersonal, institutional and organizational, as well as state and structural level; here, SGBV is not merely occurring between two individuals but rather in a social context and paradigm that systematically reinforces power imbalances which enable some people to oppress others (MacDougall et al., 2022). For example, a Two-Spirit individual’s experience of intimate partner violence is impacted by, and coexists with experiences of structural violence (e.g., colonial structures), state violence (e.g., police brutality and violence in social service settings), and meso-level violence (e.g., homophobic or transphobic discrimination from family and street harassment) (NWAC, n.d.).

Like systems approaches, multilevel approaches do not discourage individual-level SGBV interventions but argue that those interventions must also consider and respond to meso- and macro-level sources of oppression and harm. Multilevel SGBV approaches to practice and interventions address clients’ concerns (and strengths!) “while being keenly aware of the ways that their experiences and life chances have been limited and shaped by larger, inequitable social forces” (Baines, 2011, p. 11). Making

these broader sources of oppression visible in practice can be affirming and even healing, as it shifts responsibility for harm away from individuals and toward the systems and structures that produce and sustain violence.

Creating such multilevel interventions requires a balancing act “between creating the conditions for individual dignity while at the same time attending to the broad measures required to create systemic change,” including legislative and policy changes (Dale et al., 2021, p. 107). Multilevel AOP approaches do not compartmentalize levels of practices; instead, micro-level practices such as frontline

practical support, meso-level practices such as changing your organization’s policies, and macro-level political advocacy are seen as interconnected and interdependent. Implementing the feminist phrase “the personal is political,” AOP approaches integrate these various levels of practice to fight against oppression in all its forms (Barnoff & Moffatt, 2007).

Bernhardt and Cooper (2022) provide a helpful illustration of multilevel approaches applied to dismantling racism, but this infographic can also be readily applied to SGBV:



Adapted from: Best Advocacy Movement (n.d.)



INDIVIDUAL: Investigating your own positionality and privilege, cultivating intentionality, exercising self-reflection, and practicing accountability.



INTERPERSONAL: Considering yourself in relation to others to avoid practices that reinforce inequitable racial exclusions and to cultivate more equitable environments.



INSTITUTIONAL: Collecting and assessing demographic data, developing and monitoring policies, practices and decision-making processes, and reviewing organizational culture and norms.



COMMUNITY: Understanding your community and those most impacted by structural racism, cultivating relationships, co-resistance, and dismantling sectoral power imbalances and funding inequality.

Intersectionality

We have previously outlined that a central principle of an anti-oppressive framework is that power differences create social differences (Burke & Harrison, 2002).

Intersectionality adds to this principle by explaining how layers of oppression and power difference intersect according to individuals' identities to create unique forms of inequality between and within dominant and oppressed social groups (Crenshaw, 1989).

Intersectionality is a theoretical framework which contends that people's social identities cannot be separated or simply added together; rather, they interact to produce unique lived experiences due to interlocking systems of privilege and discrimination (Walubita et al., 2022). The term 'intersectionality' was first coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, an American legal scholar and critical race feminist activist. She uses the term as a metaphor for how intersectional discrimination works in real life:

Consider an analogy for traffic in an intersection, coming and going in all four directions. Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars travelling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 63)

Intersectionality explores how identities, interpersonal relationships, and our experiences of the world are multifaceted and shaped by overlapping systems of oppression and privilege (Crenshaw, 1991). Sometimes, oppressions overlap and/or reinforce one another, while at other times oppressions may be contested or undermined by our privilege in another area of our lives;

an interplay that depends on a number of factors in our immediate and social contexts (Baines, 2011). For example, one author may experience biphobia as a result of my sexual orientation, but my privileges as a White, middle-class, cisgender woman shape my experiences of that oppression and provide me with tools to address this oppression. This illustrates how binaries of oppressor/oppressed and privilege/disadvantage exist within each of us (see Bernhardt & Cooper, 2022). Intersectionality therefore acknowledges the complexity of people's lived experiences by offering a framework that allows us to examine a particular system of oppression, while also recognizing how other systems interact with and intensify it; rather than trying to artificially divide the impacts of oppressive systems from one another and limit someone's experiences of SGBV as emerging from only one source.

The insights of intersectionality help us understand patterns of SGBV: although everyone will experience the impacts of an oppressive system such as patriarchy, an individual's constellation of social identities (e.g., ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, ability, age, and immigration status) will shape their experiences of patriarchal oppression. More specifically, an intersectional lens helps us to understand roots of violence, as well as the barriers to (and facilitators of) seeking and receiving help and necessary supports, depending on survivors' social positions (see Gill, 2018). Intersectionality also provides a framework for understanding how a single system of oppression (again, using the example of patriarchy) intersects with other systems of domination (e.g., capitalism, White supremacy). As Risman (2004) explains, "each structure of inequality exists on its own yet coexists with every other structure of inequality [...] Oppressions can be loosely or

tightly coupled, and can have both common and distinct generative mechanisms (p. 444). MacDougall et al. (2022) similarly contend that SGBV “is inseparable from the violence of systemic racism, settler-colonialism, anti-Blackness, and migrant exclusion [...] Multiple forms of oppression are simultaneous and cannot be separated from another” (MacDougall et al., 2022, p. 164). Consequently, patriarchy assumes many forms across time and contexts, and its impacts differ depending on how it intersects with other systems and ideologies (see Hunnicutt, 2009).

Another example of applying intersectionality to understand patterns of SGBV experienced by racialized individuals is to consider the interlocking impacts of poverty, housing insecurity, systemic discrimination, mental health challenges, and intergenerational trauma caused by colonialism and the legacies of the trans-Atlantic slave trade (see Dale et al., 2021). Similarly, some queer theorists acknowledge that the experiences of queer people of colour are different from those of White queer individuals, where the former may experience unique forms of being “othered” as well as amplified experiences of discrimination (Bermea et al., 2019). Intersectionality, then, is a multilevel approach—it is not only identity-based but is also structural, showing us how power interlocks and intersects at all levels to create inequalities between and among individuals, communities, and inequitable systems (NWAC, n.d.). As Bernhardt and Cooper (2022) explain:

Structural intersectionality avoids treating social identity categories as fixed and natural and instead explores how these categories are tied to larger forces, histories, and systems that create and reinforce inequitable power relations...For instance, structural

intersectionality isn’t just about being a Black woman with a disability; structural intersectionality considers how a society that treats being white, male, and able-bodied as the norm impacts experiences of exclusion and discrimination, and reproduces unequal systems and policy gaps (p. 2).

Importantly, intersectionality also provides us with language to understand distinct experiences and power dynamics within social groups and to understand violence perpetrated by a socially oppressed group. For instance, although we exist in a patriarchal society, “some women participate in, benefit from, and perpetuate power relationships which maintain the dominant capitalist and patriarchal order. Therefore, some women [...] abuse power in the public arena of their workplace or the street or more often in the private realm of the family” (Fraser & Seymour, 2017, p. 93). An example of this can be found in the anti-feminist and cisheterosexist writings of the REAL Women of Canada (2008), who argue that “modern day feminism has provided a new straight-jacket for a large segment of the female population [where] women are made to feel that unless they pursue a career in the marketplace, they can’t hold their heads up ” (p. 9). This organization goes on to argue for traditional marriage and contends that feminism demeans and devalues the roles of being a wife and mother, and that it has “infiltrated” Canadian courts with a “feminist and homosexual dominated Court Challenges program which leads female judges to “promote the feminist position in cases argued before them” (REAL Women of Canada, 2008, p. 7). Perhaps most insidiously, they argue that the feminist principle of women being oppressed by men in a patriarchal social structure is “inherently flawed” (REAL Women of Canada, 2008, p. 4). These examples illustrate how harmful

rhetoric and actions can emerge from *within* an oppressed group. Unfortunately, very few policies take into account the differences between women and how interlocking effects of sexism with racism, homophobia, ableism, and classism marginalize certain groups of women while privileging and centering the needs and experiences of others (Sinclair, 2003; NWAC, n.d.).

An intersectional lens does not treat women as a homogenous group nor does it conflate Violence against women with GBV. As we'll explore in the upcoming section on feminism, the GBV sector has historically focused on cisgender and heterosexual men's violence against cisgender and heterosexual women (CEDAW, 2017). However, treating "women" as a monolithic identity "obscures the many intersecting identities which may overlap with a person's identity as a woman, and may hide or ignore how these can impact their risk of GBV" (CEDAW, 2017, p. 5). A woman's various socio-cultural identities (e.g., being a Black woman, or a queer disabled woman, or a trans woman) will expose them to distinct forms and risks of violence for being a woman (e.g., violence rooted in misogyny) *and* for being a member of marginalized communities (e.g., violence rooted in racism or xenophobia). Using an intersectional approach considers the heterogeneity of women's experiences with GBV as a result of oppressive systems impacting them in different ways.

What does it mean to provide intersectional anti-oppressive practice?

In the section above, we have unpacked the concept of intersectionality and the analytical framework it offers us. Before we can employ intersectional AOP, it is important to recognize that to navigate and resist oppression and

power imbalances we must also resist *hierarchizing* oppressions, which "refers to the ongoing competitions among different groups for recognition of their specific experience of oppression" (Barnoff & Moffatt, 2007, p. 59). Such competition can undermine the pursuit of social justice by overlooking how systems of oppression intersect and reinforce one another. Although certain populations are more frequently targeted for violence because of how their gender intersects with other oppressions, the nature of this targeting varies across different social and political contexts. Consequently, it is essential not to homogenize the experiences of different groups. That said, it is equally important to acknowledge how "relations of oppression organize the difference that divides us" (Mulay & Siddiqui, 2012, p. 102). In other words, this division between marginalized groups is a key mechanism allowing oppression to persist, as it undermines and weakens collective efforts to challenge the systems that sustain it.

At its core, an intersectional approach to service provision better enables us to "provide safe and supportive services for all survivors, in a manner that allows for one to show up as their whole selves, with all of their identities and experiences" (Resource Sharing Project & NSVRC, 2020, p. 118). For clients, having to hide parts of themselves or needing to compartmentalize their needs is re-traumatizing and oppressive (Resource Sharing Project & NSVRC, 2020). Working with someone who sees and understands how forms of oppression intersect in their lives better ensures that the services and care they are seeking is both anti-oppressive and trauma-informed.

Feminism

Feminism has been noted several times throughout this Guidebook, but now we'll

take a closer look at both the concept and how feminist approaches provide a crucial foundation for AOP. Feminism is a complex term and can simultaneously be considered a social and political movement, an activist stance, a theoretical perspective, and an identity (Seymour, 2012). Since the 19th century, feminist movements and ideologies have focused on defining, developing, and defending equitable political, economic, cultural and social rights for women. While the specific issues and campaigns feminists have focused on have changed, reflecting various political and social environments and priorities (Tremblay et al., 2016), several core principles unite these diverse strains of feminist theory. Central among them is the understanding that sex and gender are political constructs—rather than natural or neutral categories—and that ‘the personal is political,’ meaning individual experiences are shaped by broader systems of power (Ahmed, 2017). Together, these principles ground a shared commitment to achieving equality, even if feminist movements have pursued these goals in different ways across time and context. For example, the first wave focused on formal equality (i.e., White women’s voting rights), the second wave focused on substantive equality (i.e., economic equality and reproductive justice) and the third wave is focusing on equity (i.e., addressing the impacts of White supremacy, classism, heterosexism, and ableism; and integrating intersectionality) [see Sinclair (2003) for more details].

A key struggle over the years and throughout the various “waves” of feminist activism and theorizing has been the tendency of White women to assume shared interests and needs

among women, as well as appropriating the feminist agenda to promote their own narrow interests. In discussing this history, Mulay and Siddiqui (2012) note that although it is important to recognize gender as shaping lived realities, “a political project [i.e., feminism] with a too-simple idea of ‘woman’ at its centre also has the potential to erase other kinds of difference and make certain specific experiences seem as if they were universal while marginalizing other people and other experiences” (p. 99). Kimberlé Crenshaw’s previously discussed theory of **intersectionality** is one response to this problem.

Feminism views sex and gender discrimination as a core social problem. Feminists see gender as both an identity and a broader social structure that imposes stereotypical ideas of masculinity onto those categorized as “male”, and stereotypical notions of femininity onto those categorized as “female.” Those who transgress these norms are often viewed as deviant and are punished (NWAC, n.d.). Further, what is deemed feminine is often devalued in relation to what is deemed masculine, as we discussed in the **Patriarchy section**. One of the reasons feminist theories and approaches focus on these hierarchical gender(ed) power relations (i.e., patriarchy) is because they are at the root of SGBV (McKee, 2014). In addition to fighting for women’s equality, a big component of feminist organizing is challenging and working to dismantle patriarchal structures, redefining masculinity in ways that do not expect or excuse violence as an expression thereof, and engaging men and boys in ending violence (see Kaufman, 1999).²⁴ Other key characteristics of feminist approaches include

²⁴ It is much less common nowadays, but in the 1990s several feminist theorists argued that men can’t be feminists because being feminist is based on a shared understanding and experiences of oppression based on sex (see Seymour, 2012). We do not take that stance; rather, we echo bell hooks’ (1992) argument that “everyone has a role to play” in dismantling structures of oppression, including patriarchy (in Seymour, 2012, p. 33).

a focus on how “public” and “personal” issues overlap and co-constitute one another, and how power imbalances impact social and political dynamics (Seymour, 2012, p. 22). Enloe (2014) contends that feminist analyses require investigating power, asking questions like “What forms does power take [and] who wields it?”. Indeed, connecting the personal and political and focusing on critical reflection are defining features of feminist practice (Seymour, 2012), which align with AOP more broadly.

Since the early days of feminist organizing, the movement has been beleaguered with issues, including widespread issues of White supremacy and racism and cisheterosexism. More recently, feminism has been struggling with the stigma surrounding the movement and the label of ‘feminist’, as well as neoliberal framings of feminism only in terms of identity without reference to structure. The following paragraphs will outline these core sites of struggle within feminist approaches and organizing in more detail.

Feminism...for whom?

The history of feminist organizing is tied to the history of social work as a profession, both of which have adopted a White, Eurocentric focal point and have systematically sidelined racialized women. To highlight this, we’ll draw from Hoselton and Walsh’s (2023) critical discourse analysis based on qualitative interviews with eight White, woman-identified, community-based social workers. The authors found that participants’

accounts of social work history conceal the relationship between social work and the colonial project: participants performed “scripts of White femininity”,²⁵ framing themselves as innocent²⁶ vis-a-vis the past and ongoing harms of colonialism by focusing on their desire to help or do good. Doing so “disentangl[ed] them from their complicity with systems of oppression, and further justifi[ed] their intervention into the lives of Others” (p. 49-50). Writing years earlier, bell hooks similarly describes how White women—by insisting that only men were the enemy—abdicated responsibility for their role in the maintenance and perpetuation of sexism, racism, and classism. They didn’t acknowledge their own role in these oppressive systems, avoiding confronting “the enemy within” (hooks, 1986, p. 128). hooks (1986) discusses how many White feminist theorists and activists did not call attention to, or take responsibility for changes that needed to occur within the structure of the feminist movement in response to non-White women highlighting their experiences of racism within the movement.

Patricia Hill Collins’ important work in articulating Black feminist thought outlines how Black women, although a heterogeneous group, share a collective group consciousness—a way of knowing and understanding the world that emerges from their unique experiences of oppression (Hill Collins, 2000). A source of this oppression is White feminists’ suppression of Black feminist voices, “paying lip service to the need for diversity, but changing little about one’s

²⁵ White femininity is an ideological construct that centers the experience of White women as the normative definition of woman (i.e., White women’s experiences being cast as a representation of *all* women’s experiences) (Hoselton & Walsh, 2023).

²⁶ A phenomenon of Whiteness is what Tuck and Yang (2012) describe as “settler moves to innocence”, particularly in relation to Indigenous people, consisting of “strategies or positionings that attempt to relieve the settler of feelings of guilt or responsibility without giving up land or power or privilege” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 10). Hoselton and Walsh (2023) note that although there is a lot of critical research on racism or colonial practices in child welfare, community-based social work practice is positioned as an innocent project. They argue that there is no such thing as innocent social work, and that social workers need to take accountability for the profession’s role in systemic violence to inform positive change.

own practice [and in so doing] depoliticizing Black feminist ideas” (Hill Collins, 2000, p. 6). Like Kimberlé Crenshaw, Hill Collins explains how multiple systems of oppression interact to shape Black women’s lived experiences and activism, and she challenges dominant narratives (including those of White feminism) that marginalize Black women’s voices. Her work advocates for an intersectional approach to social justice, emphasizing the importance of centering Black women’s voices in feminist discourse and organizing. Importantly, she argues that although it is critical for Black feminist thought to retain its autonomy, it should not be “separatist,” isolating itself from the experiences and ideas of other social movements and groups (see Hill Collins, 2000, p. 36). Her vision provides a wonderful roadmap for the implementation of intersectional feminist practice.

Feminist organizing has also ignored the needs and experiences of Indigenous women. Although the efforts of the first-wave suffragettes led to White women being granted the full right to vote in 1918, Indigenous women could not legally vote in Canada until 1960, 43 years later (Strong-Boag, 2016). Some Indigenous women have also pointed out that “the relatively autonomous and powerful roles women played in many Indigenous nations served as a source and an inspiration for the early challenges by settler women against patriarchal societal relations in their own societies” (Lakeman, 2012, p.76). In spite of this, Indigenous women have repeatedly found themselves on the margins of—or outright excluded from—mainstream feminist organizing. The feminist movement has been exclusionary and racist towards Indigenous

women, limiting their involvement in the movement to roles in which they merely serve or teach White women when consulted (Maracle, 1996).

Given the distinct confluence of colonialism with other axes of oppression in Indigenous women’s lives, Indigenous feminism centers on the central issue of how colonization imposed patriarchal gender relations that subordinated women regardless of their pre-contact status in their communities (some of which were matriarchal) (Suzack et al., 2010). Indigenous feminists tackle topics such as land rights (e.g., the “Land Back” movement), decolonizing Indigenous sexuality (e.g., by advocating for Two-Spirit inclusion and reclamation), and reclaiming Indigenous identity through strategies such as harnessing the media and courts as tools of protest, reclaiming expansive and egalitarian gender dynamics, and connecting the quest for gender justice with that of broader quests for Indigenous self-determination (Suzack et al., 2010).²⁷

The feminist movement has also often been a site of cisheterosexism, where many GBV service and advocacy organizations operate using a feminist framework that is based on the assumption that cisgender males are the perpetrators of SGBV and that cisgender females are the victims of SGBV (Bermea et al., 2019). Like we discussed in the section on **cisheteronormativity and cisheterosexism**, these cisheterosexist assumptions invisibilize and silence SGBV within 2SLGBTQIA+ relationships and communities, and lead to widespread lack of services appropriate for 2SLGBTQIA+ survivors. Indeed, there is a critical need for queer- and trans-positive as

²⁷ If you want to learn more about Indigenous feminism’s approach to issues such as SGBV, racism, self-determination, and decolonization, check out this wonderful book: Green, J. A. (Joyce A. (Ed.). (2017). *Making space for Indigenous feminism* (Second edition.). Fernwood Publishing.

well as intersectional approaches to feminism in order to create services that include and are safe for 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals.

The ‘f’ word

Despite the critical role of feminism in raising public awareness about the issue of SGBV and institutionalizing social services for survivors, feminist scholars and activists have long been voicing concern about the decline of visible feminist identification and politics in the sector (see [Barrett et al., 2015](#)). Seymour (2012) also notes that there is hesitation—even among SGBV workers and especially among men—to identify as a feminist, given negative connotations associated with the word. This reluctance may stem from fears of alienating funders, internal disagreements within organizations about which feminist frameworks to adopt, or concerns about community or public backlash. Because of this, it is important to reiterate the common goal that unites diverse feminist perspectives: advancing equality and justice. Distancing oneself from feminism is therefore not a neutral act; it risks distancing oneself from the pursuit of equality itself. Moreover, when individuals and organizations avoid “the ‘f’ word,” those who actively seek to undermine feminist gains—such as misogynist movements and the “manosphere”—are able to weaponize this hesitation as evidence that feminism, rather than inequality, is the problem (Barrett et al., 2015).

The neoliberal creep into feminist discourse and activism

Another key issue facing contemporary feminism is what we’ll refer to as the “neoliberal creep”, which leads to framing feminism only in terms of individual identity without reference to structure. Barrett et al.

(2015) trace the decline in visible feminist politics and identification to such identity-based approaches. These authors note how feminist academics disagree on what constitutes feminist practice: some feminist social work scholars (e.g., Bricker-Jenkins, 2002) have argued that identity-based approaches, which define feminist practice as anything that is done by individuals who claim the label of feminist, are problematic because they don’t articulate conceptual frameworks or methods that differentiate feminist models of practice from other practice theories and modalities. Further, this neoliberal creep into feminism can lead to a prioritization of individualism while erasing discussions of structural inequalities, which has contributed to the anti-feminist backlash we are currently experiencing (Sinclair, 2024).

As we’ve repeated throughout this Guidebook, implementing AOP supports the process of connecting individual problems to social issues, and to see how individual experiences are embedded in (and reproduce) broader political and social dynamics (see [Wilkin & Hillock, 2014](#)). Feminist activists have been doing this since the 1970s, when they reframed the issue of SGBV as a political rather than personal problem.

Nevertheless, and as the above sections illustrate, much of feminist thought and organizing to date has been marred and limited by reflecting the interests of White, middle- to upper-class, able bodied, cisgender women. What is needed is an intersectional feminist approach, which “requires us to pay careful attention to how Indigenous, Black, newcomer immigrant/refugee, and racialized survivors who are living at the intersections of different forms of marginalization are made more vulnerable to [SGBV] due to multiple unequal power relationships” (MacDougall et al., 2022, p. 40). Importantly, intersectional

approaches are not at odds with solidarity: we can create space for both a wide range of diverse experiences *and* come together to fight for systemic change, recognizing that sexist and misogynist oppression is inherently linked to all other forms of oppression and developing strategies to overcome fears and prejudices that may arise as a result of distinct life experiences.

Decolonization

Decolonial approaches are another distinct, yet core element to AOP more broadly. As Sium et al. (2012) articulate, decolonization is a dynamic process and takes different forms across contexts, but one thing is certain: decolonization “does not exist without a framework that centers and privileges Indigenous life, community, and **epistemology**” (p. 2). Given that colonialism is not merely one system of oppression among many, but a foundation upon which contemporary social, political and institutional systems have been built, the need to engage in meaningful decolonial approaches cannot be understated.

Clarifying this last point about meaningful engagement, Tuck and Yang (2012) caution against the casual use of the terms “decolonize” and “decolonization” when talking about social justice, schooling and research, or service provision approaches. They argue that these terms “cannot easily be grafted onto pre-existing discourses/ frameworks, even if they are critical, even if they are anti-racist, even if they are justice frameworks [...] When we write about decolonization, we are not offering it as a metaphor; it is not an approximation of other experiences of oppression” (p. 3). Because colonialism underpins other systems

of oppression, decolonization must be approached differently than other elements of anti-oppressive practice. It begins with the repatriation of land and must be led by, and accountable to, Indigenous peoples.

In light of this, it’s important to distinguish between Indigenizing colonial spaces (such as clinics, sexual assault centres and Eurocentric counselling contexts), versus a reclamation of Indigenous power and place. True decolonization (i.e., the latter of these two processes) would involve dismantling existing systems, policies, and practices, and rebuilding society based on the leadership and knowledge of Indigenous communities. While we continue to hold hope for such a transformative shift, we acknowledge our positionality as White researchers and the limits this places on our role in leading decolonization discussions. Accordingly, the remainder of this section centers on Indigenizing the colonial systems we work within, with a specific focus on the design and delivery of SGBV services.

A critical starting point in this work is acknowledging and accepting that colonization not only continues to cause immeasurable harm to Indigenous people, but also that SGBV, specifically, is rooted in colonization (see [Hunt, 2012](#); NWAC, n. d.). For service providers, this means understanding the individual and collective trauma that colonial institutions (e.g., churches, schools, healthcare systems), policies, and practices have on Indigenous folks seeking SGBV services. Awareness of these harms must be met with concrete action across all sectors of society (e.g., media, government, law, and schools), and be grounded in Indigenous perspectives on healing and justice.²⁸ Akin to the frameworks mentioned in earlier

²⁸ See https://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Calls_for_Justice.pdf for the full list of Calls for Justice emerging from the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls.

sections, Indigenizing spaces requires moving away from Eurocentric, individual-focused responses to issues like SGBV and instead addressing the broader colonial structures that produce and perpetuate this violence (NWAC, n.d.; Wilkin & Hillock, 2014).

However, awareness alone is not enough. As NWAC (n.d.) emphasizes, we must move beyond passive acknowledgement and embrace the role of “disruptive allies” who take active steps to challenge colonial harm and uplift Indigenous leadership. Efforts to end SGBV within Indigenous communities must be Indigenous-led and -driven instead of being subsumed into Western approaches. Yet deep structural changes are still required within existing systems to shift away from colonial assumptions, including reimagining how programs are developed, designed and implemented (Sinclair, 2003). Fanon (1963) similarly argues that decolonization includes a rejection of many Western values, including individualism and reliance on “objective” truth. In practice, this might involve revaluing Indigenous knowledge (e.g., teachings or oral histories), creating space to allow Indigenous storytelling as evidence, implementing widespread transformative and restorative justice approaches, incorporating traditional healing practices with both perpetrators and survivors, and adjusting policies or decision-making processes to include alternative actions instead of involving law enforcement or child welfare services (see NWAC, n.d.; Dale et al., 2021).

Adams et al. (2015) further call for “recovering historical memory,” which involves replacing colonial narratives of Indigenous identity or history with local, community-guided understandings. They also advocate for “denaturaliz[ing] conventional (scientific) wisdom,” by recognizing how knowledge production (e.g., development of “expertise”

through formal, university-accredited programs) and validation (e.g., confirmation and maintenance of this expertise through professional bodies and patient/provider power dynamics) reproduces neoliberal, individualistic ideologies which directly harm service seekers (see Adams et al., 2015). These systems uphold what Adams et al., (2015) term the “coloniality of knowledge”, which involves seeing Western (i.e., neoliberal, individualist) ways as “better” and more “modern” than non-Western or Indigenous forms of, and approaches to ways of being, ways of knowing, and ways of providing supports.

To resist these dynamics, SGBV organizations must examine where they may be upholding colonial knowledge hierarchies and actively work to create alternatives. This can include supporting Indigenous-led programming, such as ORCC’s Nature-based Healing Program, which offers a meaningful step towards reclaiming Indigenous ways of knowing and healing within existing systems.

Ultimately, Indigenizing SGBV services is not a symbolic gesture but a necessary shift toward justice, accountability, and healing (Tuck & Yang, 2012). It requires disrupting colonial logics embedded in our institutions and centering Indigenous leadership, knowledge, and visions for the future. While this work is ongoing and imperfect, it is essential to transforming systems of harm and moving toward a society where Indigenous peoples (alongside all communities impacted by SGBV) can thrive in safety, dignity, and self-determination.



Section IV: **Next Steps**

How can you implement anti-oppressive practice?

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We have presented a lot of information in this Guidebook: we have outlined numerous forms of oppression, including colonialism, neoliberalism, and patriarchy; we have argued for the need for an anti-oppressive approach to SGBV prevention and interventions; and we have provided an overview of what constitutes anti-oppressive practice, including: a systems approach, intersectionality, feminist approaches, and decolonial approaches. We fully recognize that individual anti-oppressive practice only scratches the surface in reducing the many problems caused by structural and interlocking systems of oppression (Sinclair, 2003). That said, we all have a responsibility to implement anti-oppressive practice and *act* on what we've read and learned in this document. Indeed, advocacy and social action are core components of AOP work. "Advocacy" can refer to efforts and actions which advance a particular cause, and "social action" refers to the efforts and actions designed to bring about large-scale social change (Fraser & Seymour, 2017). In this section, we provide an extensive (but not exhaustive) list of efforts and actions you and/or your organization can take to implement anti-oppressive practice.

Self-Reflection and Accountability

- Conduct privilege/positionality checks on an ongoing basis (refer to [this section](#) for more details).
- Critically examine how you're connected to broader social systems. Your personal experiences, whether insights, frustrations, disappointments, and successes can offer valuable clues about your position within systems of power and serve as a helpful foundation for reflecting on how you show up for clients (see de Montigny, 2011).
- Reflect on your motivations for entering this work. Are you driven by a desire to "do good" or are you committed to justice? (see [Hoselton & Walsh's 2023](#) discussion of "White femininity").
- Cultivate a practice of accountability and recognize that any mistakes you make along the way are an invitation to strengthen your accountability to yourself and others.
- Resist perfection: recognize that "perfection is the enemy of progress." Sometimes, we work in conservative or limiting work settings, and it's hard to do more than small, first steps towards AOP. However, even in these settings, we can still talk to our coworkers about our experiences and concerns, encourage critical thought, and approach our work in more holistic ways to make space for AOP (see Baines, 2011).
- AOP recognizes the value in implementing a "both/and" approach.

It's about addressing immediate needs and validating individual struggles while also working with other individuals and organizations to change structures and challenge the status quo. Think about the care you are providing: is it a band aid solution or crisis management? Is it part of a broader transformative process? Or is it both (i.e., serving people in crisis/ in need while simultaneously working towards fundamental social change)? (Baines, 2011)

Political Engagement and Systems Change

- Lean into being politically active. Support individuals in meeting their daily needs while simultaneously focusing on challenging and transforming oppressive systems (e.g., poverty, colonialism, racism, heterosexism, capitalism, ageism, patriarchy, ableism) that perpetuate inequity and injustice (see Baines, 2011, p. 6).
- If we accept that the personal is political, we must also recognize that nothing we do is truly neutral, and as such we can't claim to be neutral in this profession.
- Movements function best when they recognize diverse roles and find ways to employ the contributions of each in constructive ways: consider where you might fit into this process
- Once you become someone who sees and fights against oppression, it's hard to unbecome that person (Ahmed, 2017). Recognize that over time, the more you learn and the actions you take can lead to eye-opening and/or life-changing experiences, which may start to be woven into your identity as an

activist. (see Fraser & Seymour, 2017, p. 158).

- Learn to see structures and social forces as subject to change rather than as static (i.e., challenge the phrase "it's just the way things are"). These structures were created by humans and can also be recreated and reimagined.
- For example, viewing the state as a site of struggle and instability creates openings for resistance and transformation.
- Rethink activism: value the efforts of building inclusive, supportive communities as much as political activism. Indeed, we can "proactively create the kinds of communities that we think will be able to respond to harm and violence better" (Billingsley, 2019, p. 111).
- Support and engage in social movements. As we've noted throughout this document, we cannot resolve the problem of SGBV and dismantle systems of oppression on our own. We must instead join with other groups to organize and mobilize people to make larger-scale, transformative changes. Social movements and activist organizations are well-suited for building and sustaining social change.
- A good (and timely) example of this is the Feminist Influencing Group facilitated by Oxfam Canada, which brings together a number of national advocacy and public policy organizations to coalesce on issues related to SGBV and coordinate advocacy (e.g., writing joint letters to the Prime Minister). Such efforts are key starting places to challenge structural violence.

Relationship-Building and Collective Action

- When working, and organizing with others on anti-oppressive efforts, center relationship-building, foster trust, and highlight a shared commitment to the broader cause (see [OCASI, 2021](#))
- Build trust with and co-resistance with communities by:
 - Practicing empathy, humility and cultural responsiveness (see [Decolonial Approaches](#) section)
 - Facilitating their participation and leadership in decision-making and action
 - Supporting their strengths, capacities and goals, while challenging stereotypes and stigma
 - Advocating for policy and systemic change
 - Regularly evaluating and improving practices based on feedback and outcomes (LinkedIn, n.d.)
- Develop anti-oppression workshops that engage your coworkers, peers, or others in your network in critical analysis of power, dominance, and oppression [as Dale et al. (2021) recommend in the [National Action Plan](#)]. Feel free to pull from this Guidebook as a resource!
- Use arts, media and DIY activism (e.g., posters, poems, zines, videos, music, etc.) to build connections and amplify alternative narratives (Fraser & Seymour, 2017)
- Lean on and support others in co-resistance: recognize that even if our lived experiences are quite diverse, our struggles are interconnected and our liberation is bound together.

- Making such connections requires **intersectional** thinking, which considers the distinct ways that different individuals and groups experience broader systems of oppression due to their identities and social positions.

Sustaining Ourselves and Each Other

- Ask yourself and act on the following questions:
 - How can I provide support to and act in solidarity with exploited groups?
 - How can I nurture local leadership and encourage social justice initiatives (in my neighbourhood, town/city, province, or more broadly)?
 - How can I sustain myself in alienating and sterile environments (e.g., a cold or clinical workplace)?
- It can be exhausting to constantly see, hear, and think about topics like SGBV and their causes. As Fraser and Seymour (2017) remind us, “it’s important to be kind to yourself and give yourself time out (whatever this means to you), without allowing your fears or fatigue to become an excuse for inactivity and indifference. Resisting apathy and fatalism is as important to AOP workers as it is to our clients/students/patients and their communities” (p. 159).
- Indeed, we do not want to fall into the “powerless defense”, which sees power as something you either do or don’t have, failing to consider that people at *any* level of power have some degree of ability to either advance or impede anti-oppressive transformation (Kendi, 2020)

- Think “beyond the goal of simply surviving within an oppressive society, to resisting, flourishing and thriving” (OCRCC, 2012, p. 16). Support yourself and others in reimagining what healing can look like.
- Ask big questions: How can we help each other? (see [Madness and Oppression Guide](#), p. 38-39) How can we work across movements? How can our actions (however small) create momentum? Are we dedicated to “fixing existing broken institutions,” or committed to creating something new? (Burton, 1994, p.5 in Billingsley, 2019, p.38)

Conclusion: From Reflection to Collective Action

“At the end of our careers, I am betting that few of us will remember how many ticky box assessment forms we completed or how often we got our statistics in on time. But I am absolutely positive that we will remember the times we advocated for and with clients and found a way to improve things, the times we helped build campaigns to resist cutbacks, the participatory processes we helped to develop for program evaluations and the many times we marched, advocated, petitioned, sang, laughed, cried and dreamed about a better future with our clients, co-workers and fellow activists” (Baines, 2011, p. 24)

In order to transform our social and lived reality, we need to not only recognize the root causes of oppression but also commit to continual action that disrupts these roots (Fraser & Seymour, 2017). This Guidebook has aimed to support that process by exploring the social, political, and historical forces that shape sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and by inviting deeper reflection on how those oppressive forces are reproduced within and beyond our sector.

While personal reflection is a powerful place to start, we can't end there. As we learn and unlearn, our perspective, language, and thinking will start to shift. These shifts in turn (re)shape our behaviour at all levels (intrapersonal, interpersonal, and collectively), laying the foundation for meaningful action. Anti-oppressive practice must extend beyond the individual to collective, systemic efforts that confront the structures and ideologies enabling violence in the first place (Sharoni, 2018). As the quote at the outset of this section states, the goal here is not to offer

a checklist that guarantees anti-oppressive practice, but to invite a reimagining of how we can work together (Baines, 2011).

We fully recognize that service providers are already doing so much with so little: navigating burnout, bureaucratic constraints, and increasing backlash that seeks to undermine progress. We see this backlash not just in overt resistance, but in the quiet normalization of harmful policies, funding decisions, and ideological shifts that reinforce the status quo under the guise of neutrality. To counter this, we must deepen our critical analysis, expand our coalitions, and lean on each other. We must shift away from crisis management as our default, and toward coordinated, cross-sectoral strategies rooted in care, power-consciousness, and long-term transformation. This includes building meaningful relationships with housing providers, food security advocates, Indigenous communities and advocacy groups, 2SLGBTQQIA+ communities and advocacy groups, climate justice networks, and other aligned sectors. Structural change will not come from our sector alone—but we can have a critical role in facilitating it.

This work also requires that we question dominant narratives and be willing to rethink what we think we know about SGBV; as an AOP perspective involves challenging our assumptions and stereotypes about violence and abuse (see Fraser & Seymour, 2017). AOP work also requires us to reject professional gatekeeping, foster ethical and brave spaces, and centre mutual aid and shared knowledge. By anchoring ourselves in relationships, accountability, and lessons from past and

present social movements, we can begin to build a sector that not only responds to violence, but actively works to dismantle the systems that sustain it (see Hill Collins, 2000).

As Baines (2011) reminds us, anti-oppressive practice is part of a broader, ongoing struggle for social change. That means the work is always evolving—there will be discomfort, imperfection, and course correction. It also means that the work is slow-moving, where quick, “silver bullet” solutions will not suffice. But power is never absolute nor unalterable; wherever power operates, so too does the possibility of resistance (Stoddart, 2007). Let this Guidebook be a companion in your journey, and let that resistance, fueled by care, courage, and collective action, shape how we support survivors, each other and the violence-free communities we are seeking to build.

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Appendix A: Glossary

Notes on Language

As this Guidebook notes, it is crucial to be intentional with our language, not only to reflect different understandings of SGBV but also to acknowledge and respect the diverse experiences of violence and oppression (Fraser & Seymour, 2017). We've also introduced the complex topics that are subject to multiple, and sometimes conflicting, interpretations and definitions.

To support reflection and deeper understanding, we've compiled a glossary that may offer helpful context and definitions for key terms. While these definitions offer a starting point, it's important to recognize that language related violence is continually evolving and often fails to capture a full range of perspectives and experiences (Abji, 2019). Notably, when it comes to defining sexual and gender-based violence,

"[s]ome groups use more of a medical model approach where GBV is primarily seen as a health problem requiring psycho-social support and intervention. Others implicitly privilege a legal model, which emphasizes GBV as a crime and violation of human rights. These are different from critical sociological models, such as intersectional feminist approaches, which see GBV through the lens of structural and systemic risks and consequences" (Abji, 2019, p. 14-15).

It is this last approach that the Guidebook focuses on.

Definitions:

Ableism: "Ideas/beliefs that are based on the assumption that the 'able-body' is favoured/ preferred over the disabled body. Similar to the experience of racism, homophobia/ transphobia and sexism, socially constructed characteristics of disability position people with disabilities as an 'inferior' group to non-disabled people." (Odette, 2013, p. 1)

Ageism: "A form of discrimination against people based on age. It can be experienced at any age, but most commonly is experienced by those who are described as young or old. Ageism functions through stereotypes, marginalization, and social exclusion and can negatively affect the lives of people in many domains including their employment, housing, services, medical care, and group membership. Ageism is also connected to elder abuse." (CREVAWC, n.d.)

Anti-feminist backlash: A historical trend that generally resurfaces when it seems that women are making progress towards their goal of achieving equality (Flood et al., 2020). It operates formally and informally, at the individual and systemic levels, using tactics such as denial of the problem, disavowal of responsibility, inaction, co-option and repression (Flood et al., 2020).

Anti-Oppression: Anti-Oppression seeks to recognize the oppressions that exist in our society, and attempts to mitigate its effects and eventually equalize the power imbalance in our communities. Practicing anti-oppression work is not only confronting individual examples of bigotry, or confronting societal examples, it is also confronting ourselves and our own roles of power and oppression in our communities and the

bigger picture ("What is anti-oppression," n.d.).
(related to: *Anti-Oppressive Practice*)

Anti-oppressive practice (AOP): Both a theory and an approach which focuses on how systems create and maintain dominant groups' privilege and power while creating and maintaining inequitable conditions for other groups of people (Baines, 2011). AOP is a social justice-oriented approach to service provision, helping service providers not only understand that social inequities and inequalities are at the root of all oppression, but also providing them tools to fight for change (Baines, 2011).

Anti-violence sector: A broad range of organizations and individuals working to address and prevent violence, with a particular emphasis on gender-based violence. More specifically, the sector includes direct service providers, advocates, educators, researchers and policy makers; with the majority working in non-profit settings, and some working at the government level.

Biphobia: "Negative attitudes, feelings, or irrational aversion to, fear or hatred of bisexual people and their communities, or of behaviours stereotyped as bisexual, leading to discrimination, harassment or violence against bisexual people." (The 519, n.d.)

Capitalism: "An economic and political system in which individuals and corporations privately own the means of production and distribution," driven by the goal of making a profit (me too, 2022, p. 65)

Cisheteronormativity: "A system of beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours stemming from cisheteropatriarchy that normalize and naturalize being cisgender and heterosexual while rejecting and pathologizing transness and queerness as "unnatural" or "abnormal." You can see cisheteronormativity at work when people joke that a little boy and girl are

"boyfriend and girlfriend", yet the idea that queer or trans children exist is contentious and even horrifying to some people. We also see cisheteronormativity through the idea that men are biologically 'wired' to be sexually aggressive and even to rape, while females tend to be understood as 'naturally' submissive and sexually passive. Cisheteronormativity functions to reinforce the idea that men and women are biological opposites, positioning men as natural leaders and women as naturally subservient to men." (Wright, 2024) (related to: *Heteronormativity and Cisheterosexism*)

Cisheterosexism: The prejudiced belief that being cisgender and/or heterosexual is the "normal" way to be, and that heterosexuals and those who identify with their sex assigned at birth are socially and culturally superior to 2SLGBTQIA+ people (Dean et al., 2016). (related to: *Cisheteronormativity and Heteronormativity*)

Classism: "Any practices and beliefs that judge and value people according to their social class, or the social class that other people assume they belong to" (Springtide Resources, 2008). This may include practices that judge or value people (positively or negatively) according to the class position they occupy (or are believed to occupy), as well as norms, language, or policies that have the effect of reinforcing class hierarchy and wealth inequality." (CREVAWC, n.d.) (related to: *Capitalism*)

Colonialism (Extractive & Settler): A form of imperialism, which is when a state seeks to expand its power by taking territory or controlling other regions politically and economically; but always through using force, either using the military, economic force or more subtle forms of power and influence (Matthias, 2025)

➤ **Extractive colonialism:** Imperial power(s) exploit the land and Indigenous peoples for its own benefit (Roxburgh, 2023b)

➤ **Settler colonialism:** Imperial power(s) claims the land and seeks to “progressively eliminate” and displace the Indigenous population with settlers (Roxburgh, 2021)

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA): A set of analytical techniques that uncovers meanings in texts and conversations, with a focus on how discourse creates, legitimizes and reinforces power relationships and ideologies (van Dijk, 2015)

Decolonization: A dynamic process that is built around “a framework that centers and privileges Indigenous life, community and epistemology” (Sium et al., 2012, p. 2) *(related to: Colonialism)*

Depoliticized: A form of backlash against the feminist principle that the personal is political. Depoliticization reframes social harms as individual or private problems, stripping them of their political context and obscuring how broader structural, systemic, and power-based forces shape people’s experiences. *(related to: Anti-feminist backlash)*

Domination: A kind of social power—that is, a situation involving an unjust or morally illegitimate power imbalance between individuals or groups of people, where one individual or group has power over the other(s). It is generally agreed that domination comes in degrees, and that someone may be dominated even if nobody has total power over them (McCammon, 2018). Domination is a concept closely linked to oppression. Some argue that oppression is enacted or exercised domination, while others say that even having the capacity for enacting or exercising domination makes an individual, group, or system oppressive (for debate, see

McCammon, 2018). *(related to: Oppression and Power)*

Epistemology: How we know what we know.

Eurocentric: Presupposes the supremacy of Europe and Europeans in world culture, and relates history, policies, legislation, practices, structures, and societal norms according to a European perception and experience (Stoetzer, 1996). *(related to: Colonialism)*

Feminism: A complex term that can simultaneously be considered a social and political movement, an activist stance, a theoretical perspective, and an identity (Seymour, 2012). At its core, feminism is a commitment to equality.

Gender-based analysis+ (GBA+): An analytical process used to assess how policies, programs, and initiatives may affect people differently based on intersecting identity factors such as gender, race, class, ability, and sexuality. It aims to identify and address systemic barriers so initiatives are more inclusive, equitable, and safer for those most impacted by inequity (WAGE, 2024a) *(related to: Intersectionality)*

Gender-based violence: An umbrella term for “any act that is perpetrated against a person’s will and is based on [socially prescribed] gender norms and unequal power relationships. It encompasses threats of violence and coercion. It can be physical, emotional, psychological, or sexual in nature, and can take the form of a denial of resources or access to services. It inflicts harm on women, girls, men and boys” and gender diverse individuals” (UNHCR in Abji, 2019, p. 14). From our perspective, discussions and analysis of “gender-based violence [also] includes a rigorous assessment of colonialism, anti-Blackness, racialization, systemic poverty, gender identity, sexual orientation, ableism,

and citizenship status” (MacDougall et al., 2022, p. 9).

Hegemony: The idea that the ruling class maintains their power and authority. Gramsci (1971) notes that this domination is achieved through force or coercion, and/or by gaining the consent of the subordinated group(s). In other words, over time, the worldviews and perspectives of the ruling class are seen by all as “common sense,” unchangeable and inevitable.

Heteronormativity: A cultural bias in favour of opposite-sex/opposite-gender relationships (Rainbow Resource Centre, 2012) (*related to: Cisheterormativity and Cisheterosexism*)

Homophobia: “Negative attitudes, feelings, or irrational aversion to, fear or hatred of gay, lesbian, or bisexual people and communities, or of behaviours stereotyped as ‘homosexual.’ It is used to signify a hostile psychological state leading to discrimination, harassment or violence against gay, lesbian, or people.” (The 519, n.d.)

Ideology: “A set of beliefs or principles, especially one on which a political system, party, or organization is based” (Cambridge dictionary, n.d.)

Individualism: a set of ideals that “emphasize[s] values such as self-reliance, economic initiative and productivity, while negatively characterizing any form of weakness or dependence” (University of Victoria, 2017) (*related to: Neoliberalism*)

Intersectionality: A theoretical framework which contends that people’s social identities cannot be separated or simply added together; rather, they interact to produce unique lived experiences due to interlocking systems of privilege and discrimination (Walubita et al., 2022).

Macro: A level of analysis that focuses on systems and policies that shape social structures. **Meso:** A level of analysis that focuses on organizational policies and community-level dynamics. **Micro:** A level of analysis that focuses on everyday individual interactions and language.

Misogyny: “Primarily a property of social environments in which women are liable to encounter hostility due to the enforcement and policing of patriarchal norms and expectations – often, though not exclusively, insofar as they violate patriarchal law and order. Misogyny hence functions to enforce and police women’s subordination and to uphold male dominance, against the backdrop of other intersecting systems of oppression and vulnerability, dominance and disadvantage, as well as disparate material resource, enabling and constraining social structures, institutions, bureaucratic mechanisms, and so on.” (Manne, 2018) (*related to: Sexism*)

Neoliberalism: An approach to society that minimizes government involvement in social services and reduces public spending. Instead, it shifts the responsibility for providing these social services to private organizations and individuals (Brodie, 2008).

Oppression: A systematic “pattern of mistreatment,” and unjust actions or policies that facilitates an “unequal distribution of power” between targeted groups based on socially constructed categories like race, gender, class, and sexuality (Egale Canada & Enchanté Network, 2024, p. 16; Resource Sharing Project & NSVRC, 2020). Oppression can be defined as the domination by powerful groups of less powerful groups in ways that restrict their rights, opportunities and access to resources (Mullaly, 2010). (*related to: Domination*)

Patriarchy: A social system, structure and ideology in which (cisgender, heterosexual) males are the primary authority figures at the center of social organization, political leadership, morality, control of property and where fathers hold authority over women and children (McKee, 2014).

Positionality: A process of reflecting on the social identities that shape our lives, such as race, class, gender, ability, and sexual orientation (Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019)

Power: “The ability to act, to do, to exert agency” (Lakeman, 2012, p. 10) *(related to: Domination and Oppression)*

Privilege: A set of unearned advantages that ultimately depend on, and reinforce, the oppression, devaluation, and dehumanization of others (MacDougall et al., 2022)

Racialization: The process whereby people “attach racial meanings to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice or group” (Hill Collins, 2000, p. 75) *(related to: Racism)*

Racism: A specific type of discrimination and oppression that targets subordinated ethnic groups based on the socially constructed category of ‘race’ (Fraser & Seymour, 2017) *(related to: Racialization)*

Rape culture: “An environment or a culture in which rape and sexual violence is normalized due to the societal attitudes and actions about gender and sexuality. Such a culture extends from rape jokes, casual sexism, acceptance of toxic masculinity, victim blaming, and violent acts against women.” (Feminism India in me too, 2022)

Sexism: “Prejudice or discrimination based on sex, usually though not necessarily against women; behaviours, conditions or attitudes that foster stereotypes of social

roles based on sex. Sexism may be conscious or unconscious, and may be embedded in institutions, systems or the broader culture of a society.” (Canadian Race Relations Foundation, n.d.)

Sexual violence: An umbrella term used to describe unwanted sexual behaviour that is direct or implied and is committed against a person without their consent. Examples of sexual violence include but aren’t limited to “rape, sexual abuse, forced pregnancy, forced sterilization, forced abortion, forced prostitution, trafficking, sexual enslavement, forced circumcision, castration and forced nudity” (Office of the High Commissioner, 2014, para 1).

Sociological imagination: Being able to see and connect personal challenges to larger social issues (Baines, 2011)

Sociopolitical: “Of, relating to, or signifying the combination or interaction of social and political factors” (Dictionary.com, 2023)

(the) State: “A broad concept that includes government as the seat of legitimate authority in a territory but also includes bureaucracy, judiciary, the armed forces and internal police, structures of legislative assemblies and administration, public corporations, regulatory boards, and ideological apparatuses such as the education establishment and publicly owned media. The distinguishing characteristic of the state is its monopoly over the use of force in a given territory.” (Panitch, 2013).

Survivor: A person who has experienced sexual and/or gender-based violence. We recognize that not everyone will identify with this term, but it is used with the aim to provide a widely-recognized gender-neutral term (to encompass gender non-binary, gender-diverse folks) that doesn’t contribute to victim-blaming discourses.

Transmisogyny: “An intersection of two forms of oppression that transgender women are subjected to: transphobia and misogyny. Because conventional patriarchal culture views women as inherently inferior to men (misogyny), transwomen are also perceived as inferior by virtue of being feminine and pursuing a female social role in society.” (Russo, 2014) *(related to: Transphobia and Misogyny)*

Transphobia: “Negative attitudes and feelings and the aversion to, fear or hatred or intolerance of trans people and communities. Like other prejudices, it is based on stereotypes and misconceptions that are used to justify discrimination, harassment and violence toward trans people, or those perceived to be trans.” (The 519, n.d.)

Trauma-informed: An approach that recognizes the widespread presence and impact of trauma and navigates potential pathways for recovery. It also “recognizes the signs and symptoms of trauma in clients, families, staff, and others...and seeks to actively resist re-traumatization” (SAMHSA, 2024)

Upstream approaches: Seek to influence and transform “structural determinants [that] create systems of oppression that profoundly affect people’s lives.” In other words, upstream approaches tackle the root causes of inequity. Whereas “downstream approaches occur at the service level, where harms are experienced due to inequities created upstream” (Chevrette & Albanese, 2024) *(related to: Anti-oppression)*

White supremacy: A system based on the belief that White people are superior to non-White people and should maintain political, social, and economic dominance; thus giving unearned advantages to White people (KC et al., 2021) *(related to: Racism and Colonialism)*

Xenophobia: “Fear and hatred of strangers or foreigners or of anything that is strange or foreign” (Canadian Race Relations Foundation, n.d.)

On Disproportionately and Deliberately Targeted Populations

Building on these definitions, we’d also like to acknowledge our choice of language when referring to equity-seeking groups. Our language throughout this Guidebook reflects active choices made throughout the writing process and hopes to capture the complexity of these issues. Some intentional choices include:

We Avoid Using ‘BIPOC’

The term “BIPOC” came out of grassroots advocacy as a way of standing unified against systems of hate, oppression, and racism, and its use increased during the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement. However, we believe that using generalized terms like ‘BIPOC’ can unintentionally obscure the unique experiences, needs, and histories of different communities (Ajele, 2021). As Egale Canada and Enchanté Network (2024) point out, this kind of broad categorization “effectively dodges accountability for naming each group or community and understanding their distinct experiences” (p. 20). In other words, grouping people together in this way can oversimplify and erase the specific challenges they face. Where possible, we aim to recognize the distinct forms of oppression and avoid homogenizing all racialized people. Race itself is a social construct—its meaning shaped by historical and social contexts, not biology. Consequently, it is important that our language reflects these contexts by being precise as well as reflecting and respecting the terms specific groups use and prefer.

In this Guidebook, we have chosen to use terms like Indigenous, Black, newcomer, immigrant/refugee, and racialized, as inspired by MacDougall et al.'s *Colour of Violence* resource (2022). However, we acknowledge that even these categories risk oversimplifying experiences and homogenizing diverse groups. For instance, as MacDougall et al. (2022) emphasize, treating "Black, African, and Caribbean diasporic women, girls, and gender-diverse people as a monolith, while also conflating the experiences of diverse Black diasporic survivors with other racialized survivors... limits [their] humanity and deprives them of the necessary, culturally relevant protections from social service organizations" (p. 84). While this quote specifically addresses the diversity of Black communities, the underlying message centered around avoiding homogenization and recognizing the unique experiences of different groups applies equally to all communities. When referring to communities typically grouped under the term 'BIPOC,' we use the term equity-seeking communities to highlight the active struggle against historical injustices that have denied these groups equity. This contrasts with terms like "marginalized," which passively frames the issue and reinforces a narrative that centers Whiteness.

We Capitalize 'White'

We strongly align with the perspective shared by Egale Canada and the Enchanté Network (2024) regarding the importance of capitalizing the terms Black, Brown, and White when referencing race. By treating them as "proper nouns, we reject the notion that race is an inherent characteristic or that these terms are simply physical descriptors detached from historical or cultural meaning. Instead, we acknowledge them as a human construction in the same way that personal

names, place names, and important cultural artefacts are capitalized. Many style guides remain divided on the question of whether to capitalize White, arguing that to do fails to redress the dominance of Whiteness. This, too, we reject. Racialization affects everyone – to call attention to one but not the other reinforces the false notion that White experience is the cultural default and that all other experiences must be specifically noted as such" (p. 21). Hoselton and Walsh (2023) add to this understanding, stating that capitalizing 'White' unmask Whiteness as a racial identity. With these intentional choices to capitalize indicators of race, we aim to disrupt the power dynamics that uphold Whiteness as invisible or neutral and instead recognize it as an active and constructed racial identity like any other.

We Include 2SLGBTQQIA+ and Gender-Diverse Folks

This Guidebook acknowledges the historically narrow focus on violence against heterosexual cis women, which has excluded countless communities (Graaff, 2021). We recognize the harm this exclusionary focus has caused, and continues to cause. As part of a more inclusive approach, we use the term 'survivor' instead of 'woman' to include gender-diverse individuals and men who experience violence. If the term 'woman' appears in quotes from referenced sources, it should be understood to include trans women. We only make this clarification in response to the growing waves of transphobic rhetoric and actions; firmly "affirm[ing] that trans women are women" (MacDougall et al., 2022, p. 4).

As such, we are committed to using language that embraces all gender and sexually diverse communities affected by violence, including 2SLGBTQQIA+ individuals who may or may not identify as 'women'. In alignment with

our intentional language use, we want to highlight a potential paradox between our criticism of the term BIPOC on the grounds of homogenization while using another acronym, 2SLGBTQIA+. Indeed, the very reasons we should be leery of BIPOC as a shorthand are why we should be cautious of 2SLGBTQIA+. It is not possible for any single term to comprehensively capture every sexuality or gender identity. This is particularly true given that identities evolve over time and can vary by individuals' social positions and cultural contexts. That said, there are currently no viable alternatives to reference the diverse communities that exist within this acronym. Iterations of the term throughout history (from GLB to LGBT to LGBTQ to the more recent versions) illustrate "society's growing understanding, acceptance, and celebration of [sexually and gender diverse] identities" (Amber Live, 2024, para.7). For instance, placing the "2S" (which stands for Two Spirit) at the beginning of the acronym recognizes that Two Spirit, Indigenequeer, and LGBTQI Indigenous people were the first sexual orientation and gender minority people in what we now know as North America (Egale Canada, n.d.). Since the acronym was adopted by the 2SLGBTQIA+ Committee, which contributed to the 2021 Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and 2SLGBTQIA+ People National Action Plan, more and more organizations across the country have started using this acronym. Throughout this Guidebook, we use acronyms utilized by other authors, but if we are reflecting on, or discussing someone else's writing, we use the full acronym "2SLGBTQIA+". Further to this point on inclusivity and reflecting diversity, we use the term 'communities' rather than 'community' (see [Quinn, 2010](#)). By embracing this expansive and inclusive terminology (i.e., 2SLGBTQIA+ communities), we strive to

ensure that all survivors, regardless of their gender identity, gender expression, or sexual orientation, are recognized and supported.

More broadly, all of the language choices we have outlined in the section above are rooted in our commitment to a partnership model which uses "both/and" language, rather than the "either/or" language that characterizes dominator models (e.g., patriarchal ideologies) (see Eisler & Loye, 1990).

Appendix B: Reflection Questions

The aim of this Guidebook has been to stimulate—and perhaps unsettle—how you think about, and respond to SGBV. Challenging your usual ways of thinking, or stepping outside of the discourse (Smith, 2003), is often uncomfortable. It can also be difficult to take the time to think and reflect through all the concepts and frameworks we have discussed, especially when your daily workload is already so heavy. However, we believe that taking this time to think through all of the critical knowledge shared through this Guidebook is worth the effort, since adopting a critical and reflective stance, toward not only what you read and see but also toward your own practice, is the foundation of an anti-oppressive approach (Fraser & Seymour, 2017). With that in mind, we encourage you to reflect on the following:

Positionality:

Take a moment to consider how different facets of your identity are connected to systemic oppression or privilege. E.g., consider how your race may be connected with racism, or White supremacy; or how your gender may be connected to sexism, patriarchy, or transphobia.

Spotlight-White Supremacy:

- If you are White, in what areas of your life can you identify the privileges or entitlements you enjoy? How could you leverage this privilege to elevate anti-oppressive practice at your organization?
- Consider the race of people in positions of power around you. Who is your Member of Parliament, the professors who taught at your school, your current supervisor(s), etc.?

Predominant Responses to SGBV:

- Where in my education or everyday practice do I focus efforts at the individual level? Do I have space to connect these individual experiences to broader systems of oppression? If so, what does that look like? If not, then why not?
- What role do I play in visibilizing, challenging and/or dismantling systems of oppression? (Reminder-everyone has a role to play in this). How does this responsibility sit with you, or what emotions come up when you think about the role you play in addressing these systems of oppression?

Oppression:

- What does “oppression” mean to you?
- Do you think you could identify oppression and/or power imbalances operating in your daily practice (at the micro, meso and/or macro level)? If so, do you feel empowered and able to apply anti-oppressive practice to work against it? If not, why not?

Spotlight-Anti-Feminist Backlash:

- Do you encounter evidence or examples of anti-feminist backlash in your everyday work? If so, how do you address it?

Anti-Oppression:

- What does advocacy or activism mean for you? Some possible ideas: social media posts (original or shared), joining a rally, signing letters to people with decision-making power, volunteering, having

conversations with colleagues, friends, or family. There's not just one way to be an activist!

- How can the form(s) of activism you identified be leveraged specifically to contribute to broader systemic change?
- How do you see yourself committing to "deep learning"? (e.g., actively and intentionally digging deep into knowledge, even if it causes discomfort)
- Do any initial thoughts come to mind when considering the bridge between individual challenges and broader social issues? If you see these links, how can you advocate for changes to these social issues? If not, what support(s) do you need to make these links clearer?
- In considering your work, how can anti-oppressive practice (AOP) be applied at the individual, organizational and broader systemic level? What might facilitate the implementation of AOP at each of those levels? What might act as a barrier? How can I choose AOP despite the constraints I might face?
- How can I create a space for brave conversations with my clients, colleagues, managers, or others?
- How might different layers of oppression impact the community members you serve? "Where are there similarities and where are there differences in experiences and needs? Who is represented and who is underrepresented? Who is being served well? Who is underserved? Who is unserved?" (NSVRC, 2020)
- *Feminism*: What does feminism mean to you? Do you and/or your organization gravitate toward or distance yourself from explicitly feminist labels? What

factors influence your own or your organization's stance?

- *Decolonization*: According to your unique social positionality, what does meaningful investment into decolonizing efforts look like? What changes should be made to my practice and/or my organization that could disrupt colonial logics? How can Indigenous leadership and knowledge be centered and uplifted?

Appendix C: Critical Discourse Analysis Overview, Coding Dictionary & Summary of Coding Findings

Implementing CDA to develop this Guidebook

The research questions that guided our CDA were:

- 1) *How are existing resources for front-line service providers within the GBV sector talking about anti-oppressive practice(s), both in general and vis-à-vis different equity-deserving groups?*
- 2) *How can these existing resources inform an anti-oppressive framework to guide direct service providers when providing anti-oppressive care and services to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) survivors?*

Before we began reading and analyzing the resources we collected, we had a couple of hypotheses. The first hypothesis was that we would find subtle and unconscious expressions of colonial, racist, sexist, heteronormative, neoliberal, and patriarchal assumptions embedded within texts and documents intended to support direct service providers in the GBV sector (as well as resources for survivors). The second hypothesis was that there would be anti-oppressive guides/resources, but that few would provide a comprehensive implementation framework; and, even if they did, they would remain at the micro level without addressing structural power relations/dynamics. These hypotheses were grounded in the authors' lived experiences of

witnessing oppression being maintained and reproduced within the anti-violence sector. They highlight that the SGBV sector, including the resources and information created for service providers, is not immune to systems of oppression, nor separate from them (see ORCC's [Trauma-Informed and Anti-Oppressive Approaches Report](#) and ORCC's 2023 [Anti-Human Trafficking Symposium Report](#) for more on this).

Once we determined our research questions and hypotheses, we conducted a critical discourse analysis of academic and community-based resources commonly used by SGBV service providers through desktop research, with a specific emphasis on finding promising/best practices around applying anti-oppressive approaches to front-line service provision. To conduct our search, we utilized both academic databases (i.e., EBSCOHost, SCOPUS, and ProQuest) as well as online searches (e.g., Google, Google Scholar, and organizational websites). We ended up with 25 resources, which we coded using a comprehensive coding framework (see below).

Coding Dictionary

A. Colonialism:

- 1) Silence: without situating acts of violence as a direct expression of colonialism, we are contributing to the colonial narrative that a) conceals

that fact that Canada remains a site of colonial violence and b) suggests that violence happens in a vacuum without reference to any specific structure that actually perpetuate this violence

- 2) Invisibility of Indigeneity: Without (meaningful and thorough) reference to Indigenous experiences of violence (must be situated in the context of colonialism and not simply statistics), resources may be contributing to the colonial narrative that violence against Indigenous people is not important, expected, exceptional or significant
- 3) Tokenism: 'shallow' inclusion of Indigenous representation in the content and/or involvement of Indigenous people in the resource; gestures to demonstrate there is inclusion but there isn't any actual follow-up or meaningful engagement
- 4) Possession: When Canada refers to "its" Indigenous Peoples, or refers to "its" land (i.e., Canada's North)
- 5) Historicism: Placing Indigenous experiences of violence (or even Indigenous people) as only existing in the past
- 6) Racist tropes: Common tropes include 'the noble Indian'; quiet, subservient, or 'Indian princess'; as cultural beings, exotic and erotic. Other common gendered stereotypes are that Indigenous men are deviants and criminals, and Indigenous women are disposable, sexual objects
- 7) Individual and victim blaming (trauma discourse while obscuring colonialism): For example, listing statistics or focusing on how Indigenous women experience 'disproportionate rates of x,y,z'

without situating those experiences as expressions of structural (colonial) violence

- 8) Scientism: Placing an emphasis on Western (i.e., clinical) approaches to violence as superior, and framing the only acceptable method of how to measure and understand things are through science (data, statistics)

B. State (Centralized power):

- 1) Centralized decision-making (process): when a decision needs to be made, there needs to be a leader (decisions can't be made collectively), normalizing state structure where one body holds significant amounts of power and decision-making over others; Indications of replicating state structures in non-state spaces reinforcing hierarchies (i.e., reporting to a manager, or 'higher ups' in non-profit organizations)
- 2) Normalizing how people and systems in positions of authorities are 'safe spaces': suggestions to turn to the justice system (and that the justice system is a viable response, when it's unsafe and is already after-the-fact)
- 3) Framing the state as separate from violence in society: conveying that the state isn't an actor of violence (i.e., violence exists beyond the state's control among people in society, rather than the state being an actor of violence), when responses/prevention initiatives to violence are sent out to non-profits without adequate resources or supports to actually accomplish anything (but is framed in a way that the state is supporting these groups, and they are a benevolent entity for doing so)

C. Individualism (Neoliberalism):

- 1) Individual responses: individual counselling, individual crisis responses to violence and other solutions centered around helping one person at a time
- 2) Individual responsibility for staying safe: suggestions around dressing appropriately, the individual is responsible (not the society or the state), silences around the fact that societal expectations are harmful and unsafe outside of the relationship (i.e., through hegemonic expectations to keep nuclear families intact, and focusing the idea around the harm being right in front of you, ways to act, skills to learn and actions to take in order to keep out of danger)
- 3) Framing 'high-risk lifestyles' (often rooted in poverty) as reasons for experiencing violence: Replicating the assumption that 'bad things happen to bad people'
- 4) Silence around structures: Situating experiences of and responses to violence only as between individuals without framing it within a broader set of oppressive structures
- 5) Monetary solutions: having access to financial supports, employment supports as solutions (without acknowledgement that those solutions are inherently exploitative and harmful), liberation comes through economic participation
- 6) Not being prevention-oriented, or the prevention is also individual-based (because there's no structural influence), prevention vs. intervention (i.e., being reactive).

D. White Supremacy:

- 1) Not talking about race: colourblindness (not acknowledging the different experiences of B/I/POC vs. White people and embedding that into a discourse about racism)
- 2) Trauma discourse: Including statistics without acknowledging White Supremacy or racism directly, framing populations as 'experiencing disproportionate rates of violence' without making clear connections to structures which foster that violence
- 3) Invisibility of White Supremacy: Without making clear connections to White Supremacy as a structure that fosters and accepts violence against B/I/POC populations, this layer of oppression is concealed and remain a pattern of violence against certain people, without a clear explanation of why, or turn to individual factors to explain (i.e., poverty, substance use, unsafe neighbourhoods etc.)
- 4) Celebrating multi-culturalism: Framing Canada (or the West) as benevolent actors that are accepting of all culture, when in reality, these cultures are only tolerated to the degree that they've been diluted and/or assimilated to a certain level of acceptability
- 5) Othering: Framing other culture's acts of violence as archaic or unacceptable imply that Western approaches to feminism and equality are superior (also, framing SGBV as an issue experienced more intensely or more prominently in "other" cultures vis-a-vis "the West").
- 6) White saviourism: only White people can save, support, teach, other people because they are inherently superior

- 7) Lumping, homogenizing, and/or oversimplification (i.e., not applying distinctions-based lens → conceptually related to Othering)

E. Patriarchy:

- 1) Perpetuating sexist constructions of gender and attributing qualities according to dominant notions of sex and gender roles (e.g., the provider/nurturer or homemaker; male dominance v. female subservience; passive/active; logical/hysterical dichotomies)
- 2) Anti-feminist backlash (enacting discourse): adopting victim blaming language that focuses on responsabilizing targets of violence, centralizes consent as a solution to sexual violence, suggests that there is no inherent power imbalance between perpetrators and targets and purports that sexual violence does not involve actual force
- 3) Silence on patriarchy as a structure. Reluctance to express views that may be associated with feminist theory (enabling discourse)
- 4) Relying on education as a solution to sexual violence: assumption that sexual violence occurs from lack of self-esteem, knowledge about healthy relationships, uncertainty how to say no, and confusion among boys about how to identify when a person is not interested; anti-feminist discourse that sexual violence is a misunderstanding
- 5) Minimizing sexual violence or role of perpetrators, making perpetrators invisible; normalizing discourses about sexual violence in society as a natural or unchangeable reality, also boys will be boys discourses

- 6) Paternalistic language around people who experience violence: using victim-blaming language and/or language suggesting that people who experience violence 'don't know how to help themselves'

F. Classism:

- 1) Monetary solutions: Economic security makes you better and protects you from violence: Framing middle-upper class people as impervious to experiencing SGBV, liberation and protection comes through economic participation (i.e., if you get a job then you will not experience SGBV)
- 2) "High-risk lifestyle" rooted in poverty as the reason for experiencing SGBV
- 3) Merit-based ideologies: If you work really hard, get a job you won't experience SGBV, Indication that people who are poor are of poorer quality of character (stupid, immoral, incompetent because if they weren't, they'd be rich)

G. Cis-Heteronormativity:

- 1) Normalizing exerting power imbalances
- 2) Binary, nuclear, and monogamous relationships as the sole foundation of sexual and romantic relations
- 3) Emphasis on heterosexual relationships:
- 4) Silence on replicating patriarchal structures in queer relationships
- 5) Silence on transphobia, biphobia, and homophobia as forms of violence (including how/where they overlap and how/where they're distinct)

Summary of Coding Findings

Counts=Number of distinct resources containing this code

Total= Total number of times a code comes up in the data as a whole

A's: Colonialism

	A1	A2	A3	A4	A5	A6	A7	A8
Counts	6	2	3	2	5	-	1	2
Total	8	2	5	2	6	-	1	3

B's: State (Centralized Power)

	B1	B2	B3
Counts	-	5	6
Total	-	25	9

C's: Neoliberalism

	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	C6
Counts	3	3	1	9	2	1
Total	3	9	1	28	2	3

D's: White Supremacy

	D1	D2	D3	D4	D5	D6	D7
Counts	1	1	-	1	1	1	1
Total	2	1	-	1	1	2	1

E's: Patriarchy

	E1	E2	E3	E4	E5	E6
Counts	3	1	2	4	4	2
Total	8	1	7	5	7	9

F's: Classism

	F1	F2	F3
Counts	1	-	-
Total	1	-	-

G's: Cis-Heteronormativity

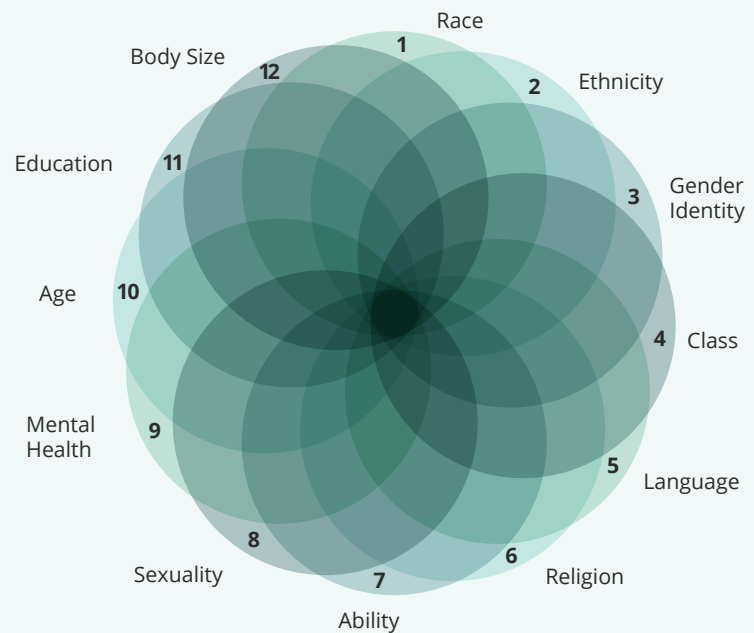
	G1	G2	G3	G4	G5
Counts	-	3	3	1	2
Total	-	6	3	2	3



While we've made much progress in challenging rape myths and perceptions of sexual violence, there's still much work to be done.



Especially as we still haven't adequately addressed the reality that sexual violence is shaped by **unequal power relations** such as 1-12 and many more.



Our services tend to be reactive rather than preventative; focusing on **crisis intervention and consent education**, rather than on dismantling the broader social and structural inequalities that enable violence.

upstream

structural determinants

The root causes of inequity are produced here.

midstream

social determinants of health

Inequities are either reinforced or mitigated here.

downstream

individual harms of inequity

Inequities are experienced by individuals here.



We believe we need to embed anti-oppressive practice across **all levels of intervention**:

marco
structural



meso
institutional



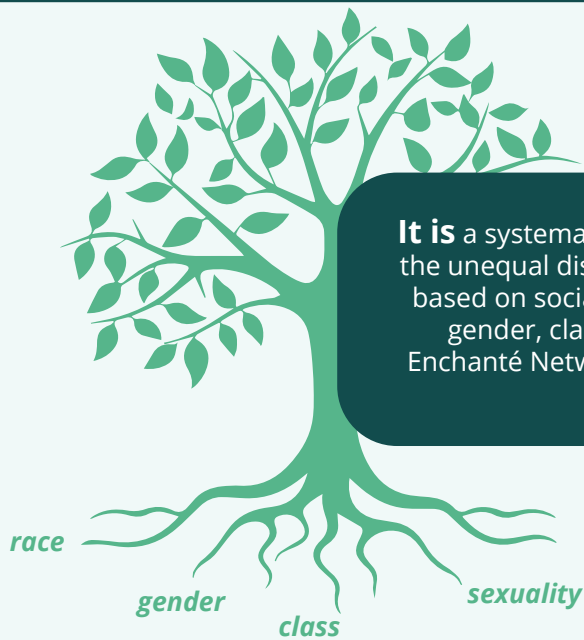
micro
personal



Anti-oppressive practice asks us to consider how violence is produced through systems of oppression, and how our work can **challenge, rather than reinforce, those systems.**



Oppression is not just about isolated acts of discrimination.



It is a systematic pattern of mistreatment rooted in the unequal distribution of power* between groups based on socially constructed categories like race, gender, class, and sexuality (Egale Canada & Enchanté Network, 2024; Resource Sharing Project & NSVRC, 2020).

* Power is not always exercised through overtly abusive acts. Instead, it often appears in subtle, everyday interactions such as whose voices are heard, whose stories are believed, and whose needs are prioritized (van Dijk, 2015; van Dijk, 1993)

Over time, this unjust social order becomes so deeply embedded across society's systems, institutions* and beliefs, that this power imbalance starts to be seen as the status quo (and goes unnoticed).



* Institutions such as governments, schools, media, health care, religion, and law all play a role in maintaining these hierarchies



Ultimately, oppression creates the conditions for violence by establishing and normalizing power imbalances. Sexual and gender-based violence more specifically is both an outcome of, and tool for maintaining these power imbalances and systemic inequality (Adkinson-Stevens & Timmons, 2018)

Different layers of oppression:

Colonialism



State Power



Neoliberalism



Classism



White Supremacy



Racism



Patriarchy



Cis-heteronormativity

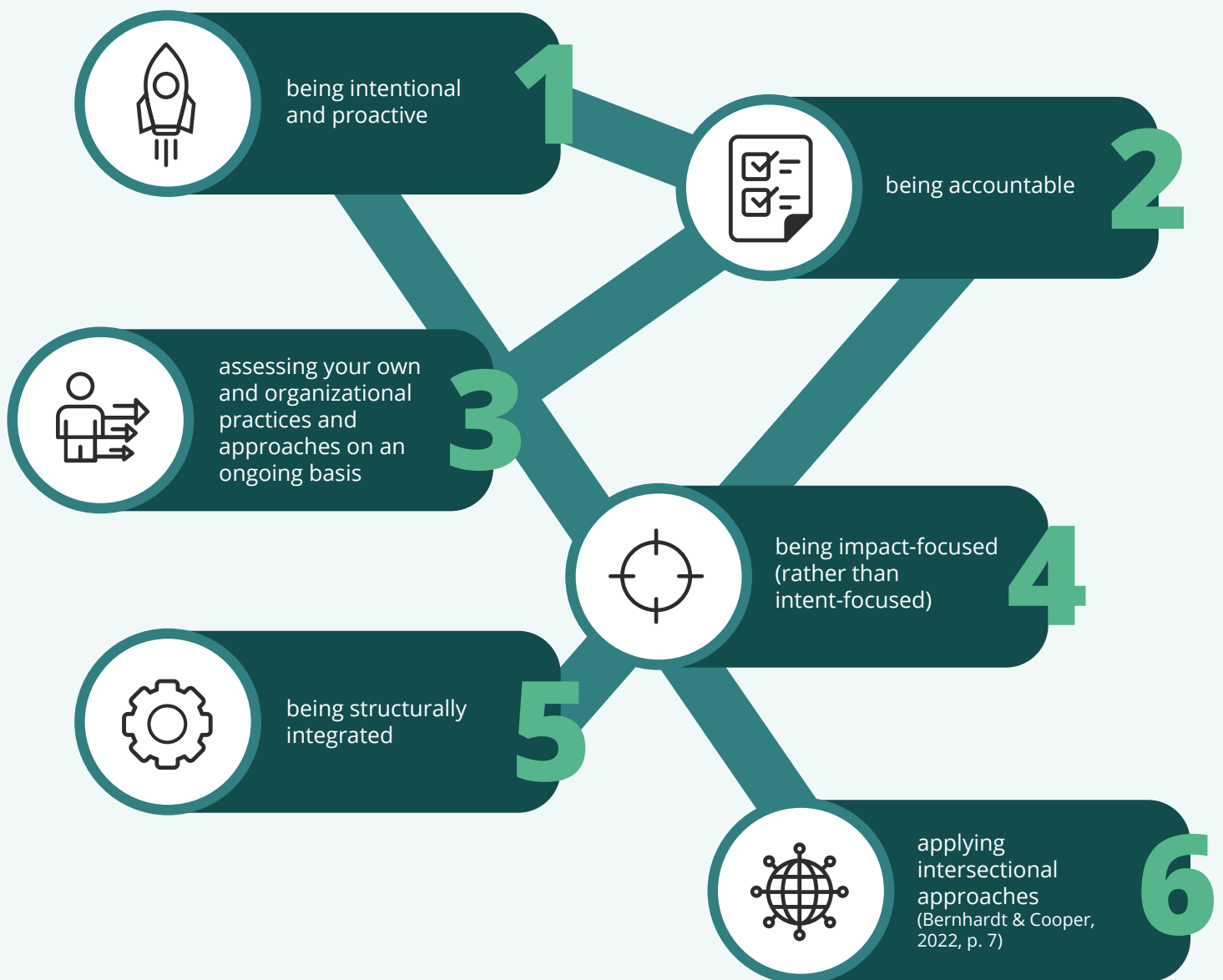




Anti-oppressive practice (AOP) is about recognizing these conditions and actively seeking to dismantle the systems of oppression that sustain and allow for SGBV to continue (Baines, 2011).

Drawing from feminism, decolonization theory, queer theory, anti-racist approaches, and disability justice approaches, AOP helps us see how systems give power and privilege to some groups while creating barriers for other groups (CICMH, 2022)

**A key element to AOP is its emphasis on practice.
6 principles to guide AOP:**



**Because AOP is an ongoing, evolving process,
it is often messy and non-linear** (Baines, 2011).

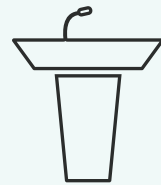


Steps for Implementing Anti-Oppressive Practice



Prioritize
relationship-building
and collective action

Commit to sustaining
yourself and others



Lean into **political
engagement** and systems
change efforts



Engage in self-reflection
and building a practice of
accountability



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Women and Gender
Equality Canada

Femmes et Égalité
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