Introduction

Very broadly speaking, feminist perspectives on domestic violence (DV) see DV as caused by and constitutive of gendered patterns of power and privilege in society (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Schechter, 1982; Ylö & Bograd, 1988). In seeing DV as socially produced within and part of a gender order, feminist scholars focus on the complex social processes that produce both gender and DV, developing epistemologies as well as methodologies to study and explain these processes. Feminist research and theorisations of DV originate in and are shaped within different disciplines and cover a range of topics. These include how victims’ and perpetrators’ gendered subjectivities and embodiment shape gendered relations and structures, including gendered patterns and experiences of DV victimization (Young, 1990; Cahill, 2001, 2016) and perpetration (Hearn, 1998), the gendered effects and harms of DV on selfhood (Walker, 1979; Lundgren, 2004; Anderson, 2005), the role of culture and everyday interactions and experiences of DV (MacKinnon, 1987; Kelly, 1987, 1988a; Smart; Alcoff, 2014; Gavey, 2005; Gunnarsson, 2018) and the intersection of gender, race, class and other forms of domination and the consequences for the lived experience as well as institutional responses to DV (Crenshaw, 1989; Hill-Collins, 2000). Another strain of research focuses on the politicisation of DV at the national and international level, including the role of the state in tolerating, facilitating and responding to DV (MacKinnon, 1989; Walby, 1990), gendered institutional responses to DV (Stanko, 2013 [1985]) and ongoing struggles between the feminist perspective and other perspectives on DV in international bodies like the UN (Merry, 2003, 2006, 2016). Social movement research focuses on the importance of activism for state responses to DV (Schechter, 1982; Htun & Weldon, 2012) as well as the need for and failure of legal reforms to prevent DV and support victims (Stark, 2007, 2009, 2013; Salter, 2012; Burman & Brooks-Hay, 2018; Barlow, Johnson, Walklate, & Humphreys, 2019; Walklate & Fitz-Gibbon, 2019). Finally, there is a stream of studies focussing on the effectiveness of interventions such as perpetrator programmes and initiatives to engage men against DV (Hester & Newman, 2021; Flood, 2021).

The feminist perspective is often presented as the hegemonic or even mainstream perspective on DV. However, from the outset, the feminist framing of DV has been contested academically as well as politically. In the UN, the feminist perspective on DV has been continually challenged by competing perspectives, the health perspective in particular (Merry, 2016). Academic
controversies over prevalence and gendered patterns of perpetration and victimisation (Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980; Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Kimmel, 2002; Loseke & Kurz, 2005; Straus, 2005; Johnson, 1995, 2008) have been essential – and productive – in the methodological and theoretical development of the field. This controversy still resonates in contemporary struggles over definitions and methodologies for measuring DV.

Although feminist perspectives have been highly influential in theorising, researching and politicising DV – somewhat paradoxically – DV has been more or less ignored in mainstream feminist theory (if one can talk of such). There is for instance no mention of DV in the comprehensive Sage handbook on feminist theory (Evans et al., 2014). Feminist perspectives on DV reflect the theoretical developments in feminist theory and contribute to the increasing theoretical diversity and methodological sophistication of studies of violence and sexual violence (McPhail, Busch, Kulkarni, & Rice, 2007; Brown & Walklate, 2011). This chapter makes no claim of presenting a coherent story nor a full picture of the diverse and evolving feminist perspectives on DV. Rather, the chapter will mimic the multiplicity of the field by highlighting some formative and ongoing controversies. The ambition of this chapter is to elucidate how feminist perspectives on DV may be seen as an ongoing practice of simultaneously theorising and politicising DV.

**Discussion and analysis**

**Co-development of practices and theories**

The feminist perspective on DV was formed in opposition to previous psychological and criminological explanations that linked violence to perpetrators’ psychopathology and substance abuse – and masochist traits in the victim (Gelles, 1976). It sprang out of the feminist movement that, under the slogan the private is political, brought forward a range of experiences that had been hidden and silent, seen as belonging to the private realm.

The framing of violence as ‘men’s violence against women’ and a ‘women’s issue’ was pivotal in transforming DV from a marginal phenomenon which was perceived to affect only a few, to a general issue being caused by and constitutive of a patriarchal social structure in which women’s subordination was systematic and institutionalised. According to Walby (1990) violence is an institution in itself and a central and relatively independent pillar of gender orders. The conceptualisation of DV as rooted in the core of the social structure, potentially affecting all women, was important for mobilisation of solidarity and support for victims of DV, for making DV a criminal offence and the development of perpetrator programmes, as well as for the inclusion of women’s rights among the human rights and the recognition of DV as a violation of women’s human rights, all of which are the result of the women’s movement’s persistent struggles over several decades. In a cross-country analysis, the strength of the women’s movement was found to be the key factor of success in states’ responses and policies related to DV (Htun & Weldon, 2012).

Advocacy has been an important element of feminist practice, and this is particularly true in the field of domestic violence (Bjørnholt, 2018; Malbon, Carson, & Yates, 2018). The importance of practical activism and institution building, most notably the shelter movement, as part of the feminist response to DV cannot be ignored. The first domestic violence shelter was created in London by Erin Pizzey in the early 1970s (Pizzey, 1974). As soon as they were in place, the shelters demonstrated the magnitude and pervasiveness of violence and sexual abuse in women’s lives. However, it is also important to note how activism and practice have not only been important for policies but have also been
DV and abuse through a feminist lens

at the core in the development of feminist research and theory, including the theorisation of violence (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013; Ross, 2017; Bjørnholt, 2018), as part of a wider feminist ambition of problematising the gendered assumptions in the mainstream disciplines, redefining what constitutes knowledge, the relations between researcher and researched, as well as the methods of producing scientific knowledge and the theories that guide research. In line with other liberation movements, theorising from experience, giving voice to hitherto silenced subjects were at the root of feminist theory in general as well as in theorisations of DV.

An example of the co-development of feminist practice and theory is the development of treatment programmes, starting with the initiative to develop a comprehensive community response to perpetrators in Duluth, Minnesota, and the simultaneous conceptualisation of the ‘power and control wheel’: a theoretical model that links a variety of violent and abusive behaviours to power and control. The ‘power and control wheel’ was created by the founders of the Duluth batterer programme, Ellen Pence, Michael Paymar and Coral McDonald, in close consultation with battered women’s groups in Duluth, and they credit the women’s input as being the sole basis for the concept (Pence, 2010).

Increasingly, the theoretical and political legacy of black and queer feminism has been recognised also in the field of DV. The Combahee River Collective (CRC) was one of the most important organisations to develop out of the antiracist and women’s liberation movements in the US of the 1960s and ’70s (Harris, 2001; Ross, 2017; Taylor, 2017). Combining activism and theoretical innovation, the collective mobilised against violence and murder of black women as well as for reproductive rights. They challenged the racism and class-based oppression in American society including the lack of understanding of race and class-based oppression – and implicit racism – in the white women’s movement, as well as the male leadership in the civil rights movement and black men’s sexism and violence against black women. Based on their analysis of the experiences of black, lesbian women in American society, they introduced terms such as ‘interlocking oppression’ and ‘identity politics’. The CRC (1997 [1977]) thus provided an analysis based on the idea that multiple oppressions reinforce each other to create new categories of suffering, as captured in the concept of intersectionality, that was later coined by Crenshaw (1989). Hill-Collins (2000) used the concept a ‘matrix of domination’ to describe how intersecting oppressions are organised.

The travelling and appropriation of theories and concepts, as well as interventions in new contexts may raise new problems. The Duluth model has been very influential in the design of perpetrator programmes all over the world. However, it has also been criticised along with other theories and models originating in the Global North, for not sufficiently taking into consideration the specific social context, such as the reality of racism, colonial oppression and inequality and its consequences for perpetrators as well as victims of DV in the Global South (Boonzaier and van Niekerk, this volume; van Niekerk, 2021). Such critiques can be seen as part of a wider trend towards de-colonising knowledge production (Smith, 2013 [1999]). However, in contrast, the popularity and appropriation of the concept intersectionality by European scholars has also been criticised for erasing its origin in black feminist thought (Bilge, 2013).

Prevalence, definitions and methods of measurement

Framing DV as men’s violence against women rests on the assumption that DV is predominantly perpetrated by men against women. This claim has been challenged by sociological survey research framing DV within a family conflict model, relying on a particular scale of measurement, the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS), developed by Straus et al. (1980) for the first national survey on DV in the US which concluded that DV was gender symmetrical: men and women
were equally represented both as victims and perpetrators of partner violence. The CTS has been widely used in survey research – and has been widely criticised from a feminist perspective. The main critique has been that the definition of violence, counting incidents alone, ignores context as well as issues of power and control (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Kimmel, 2002; Walby & Towers, 2017). Another critique is that surveys with their reliance on physical violence may count some incidents that are not experienced as violence, which might affect the gendered distribution of reported violence (Johnson, 1995, 2008; Myhill, 2017; Ackerman, 2015, 2018). Finally, feminist research links DV to its consequences in terms of harm (Walby & Towers, 2017) and homicide (Dobash & Dobash, 2015; Monckton Smith, 2019).

The ‘gender symmetry controversy’ has been formative in the development of theories and concepts, and has continued to inform methodological and epistemological work in the field of DV over several decades (Straus, 2005; Loseke & Kurz, 2005; Walby, Towers, & Francis, 2016; Walby & Towers, 2017, 2018; Ackerman, 2015, 2018; Myhill, 2017; Myhill & Kelly, 2019). Johnson (1995, 2008) developed a typology of different forms of violence as an attempt to explain why feminist research based on research on victims, came to the conclusion that DV was mainly perpetrated by men against women, while representative population studies based on the CTS concluded that DV was gender symmetrical. Johnson’s typology distinguishes between severe forms of repeated violence in combination with control and power asymmetry: ‘patriarchal terrorism’/‘intimate terrorism’, which is predominantly perpetrated by men against female partners; and incidents of physical violence between couples, ‘common couple violence’, which are not part of a pattern of power and control, and which are gender symmetrical. Johnson argued that surveys will predominantly measure the latter, while clinical studies of victimised populations will measure the severe forms. However, Johnson’s typology has been criticised for being static (Walby & Towers, 2017), for its lack of empirical basis and for the recent use of the typology in court, where, contrary to Johnson’s intention, the concept ‘common couple violence’ is increasingly used to minimise violence as part of the defence of perpetrators (Lapierre & Côté, 2014).

Recently, the controversy has moved beyond the ‘gender symmetry’ debate between feminist and non-feminist researchers. Today, different feminist researchers place themselves on different sides in an ongoing debate over definitions and methods of measurement; on one hand, those who promote relying on and improving survey methodology, focussing on physical violence, and on the other hand, those who focus on coercive control.

Drawing on data from the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW), Walby and colleagues (Walby et al., 2016; Walby & Towers, 2017) suggest a narrower definition of violence with the aim of harmonising the definitions of DV in research and criminal law. Based on a definition of DV as incident plus harm, they launch the concept Domestic Violent Crime, along with other proposals aimed at improving methods of measurement to more accurately represent gendered patterns of exposure to violence in surveys. Walby and Towers’ argument is that adding harm changes the gendered pattern of exposure, as the same act will have different consequences in terms of harm if it is carried out by a man against a woman or a woman against a man. While this assumption is supported by Walby and Towers’ analysis of data from the CSEW, when tested on a Norwegian survey, adding harm did not change the gender distribution of DV (Bjørnholt & Hjemdal, 2018) – but fear of being injured or killed did.

Donovan and Barnes (2019) who have for decades been studying DV in same-sex and gender-non-conforming couples using feminist perspectives, are also concerned that a too strong emphasis on gender in survey studies may reinforce the ‘public story of IPV’ as limited to (heterosexual) men’s violence against heterosexual women as well as perpetuate sex and gender stereotypes, ignoring
non-conforming victims’ experiences. Donovan and Barnes conclude that there is still a need for typologies of different kinds of violence and for more inclusive methodologies and theories.

Coercive control

Coercive control has been an important and indeed main frame of understanding in feminist conceptualisations of DV (Stark & Hester, 2019), although the definitions and methods of measurement vary (Hamberger, Larsen, & Lehrner, 2017). It is an important aspect of Johnson’s concept ‘patriarchal terrorism’, and Stark (2007, 2009, 2013) argues that coercive control is indeed the defining aspect of DV and that DV should be understood as a liberty crime. Kelly has argued along similar lines that DV limits women’s space for action (2003). Sharp-Jeffs, Kelly and Klein (2018) have developed a scale of measuring for coercive control, focussing on space for action. According to Stark, the concept ‘coercive control’ was developed to describe the experiences of women who contacted shelters and health services for victims of violence, as an effort to overcome the shortcomings of both research and societies’ responses to DV, resulting from an incident-based understanding of DV (Stark, 2009).

Although the concept of coercive control and the related typologies were developed with cis-, heterosexual, adult and married or cohabitating couples in mind, the concept and related typologies, such as those of Johnson and Stark, have also inspired research on the dynamics of power and control in same-sex and non-gender-conforming couples (Donovan & Hester, 2014; Donovan & Barnes, 2019) and in studies of DV in relation to motherhood (Katz, 2019). Recently, Johnson’s typology has also been used in studies of violence among adolescents (Överlien, Hellevik, & Korkmaz, 2019).

Walby and Towers (2018) have further developed their argument in favour of improved survey methodology focussing on physical violence and harm, arguing that the main assumption underlying the gender symmetry controversy – that surveys do not reveal gendered patterns of exposure – has now been debunked. Subsequently, surveys using more precise methodologies may give an accurate picture of gendered patterns of DV. As a result, they argue, there is no need for focussing on coercive control, including typologies such as that of Johnson.

Myhill and Kelly (2019) and Donovan and Barnes (2019) challenge this argument and raise concerns over Walby and colleagues’ privileging of physical violence, arguing that the feminist focus on power and control as defining characteristics of DV is still crucial in describing the lived experience of DV and being able to identify those most at risk of escalation, fear and a closing down of ‘space for action’. They conclude that there is still a need for the concept coercive control and for typologies to distinguish between different forms of violence, and emphasise the role of qualitative research on victims in the development of concepts and theory in the field. In Donovan and Barnes’ words it is ‘important to (re-)state the critical contribution of qualitative research to IPV in its own right and in informing the design, the analysis and interpretation of quantitative data’ (2019, p. 10).

Recently, coercive control has also increasingly made its way into legal jurisdictions. However, as it has been taken up in legislation as a crime in itself, it turns out to be difficult to translate into legal practice, and critiques have argued that it may indeed harm the women it was intended to help (Hanna, 2009; Burman & Brooks-Hay, 2018; Walklate & Fitz-Gibbon, 2019).

States’ role

Placing men’s violence against women in a larger social context also include research and theorisation of institutions and states’ complicity in violence. Stanko (2013 [1985]) examined the
male bias in institutional responses to women’s complaints of DV in the decision-making process of the criminal justice system and of administrative personnel. MacKinnon (1989) and Walby (1990) have argued that the lack of or inadequate responses to men’s violence against women conveys that the state is condoning it. In Walby’s words, ‘Only when inter-personal violence against women and minorities is effectively criminalized can it be said that the state does not condone it’ (2009, p. 201).

On the other hand, demanding state action and holding states to account, in terms of legal reforms and formal obligations and policies, has been a major focus of feminist activism against DV. Nevertheless, feminist scholarship has also demonstrated that the law largely fails to produce justice for the majority of victims of DV, that women’s experiences of DV do not necessarily fit with the legal definitions of DV, and that laws alone are not very effective in protecting victims or reducing DV (Burman & Brooks-Hay, 2018; Walklate, 2019). According to Salter, ‘Legal responses to GBV often employ the language of perpetrators of GBV, and this vocabulary is used in a similar fashion in order to over-write the victim’s own experiences’ (2012, pp. 6–7).

Different strands of feminist theorising and research offer different solutions to this dilemma. While Walby and colleagues have proposed to define DV more narrowly to fit with the criminal definition of DV by launching the term Domestic Violent Crime (DVC) (Walby et al., 2016; Walby & Towers, 2017, 2018), another strand is the trend towards expanding the concept of DV to criminalise behaviours such as economic abuse, and stalking, as well as criminalising coercive control as a crime in itself. Critiques of the strong reliance on legal solutions to DV and sexual violence have also spurred new developments towards transformative justice (Kim, 2018).

The theorisation of DV in relation to states has been revitalised in indigenous and postcolonial feminist studies (Kuokkanen, 2015, 2019), exploring how collective trauma resulting from histories of oppression and the complex and gendered relations with states and state apparatuses in the past and today, may influence levels of DV as well as gendered patterns and responses to DV in indigenous populations, and indigenous victims’ access to justice.

**Agency and victim positions**

The power and control wheel was developed as a contrast to the ‘cycle of violence’ model, developed by Walker (1979), a model that explains how the victim is trapped and her self-esteem is undermined in the abusive relationship, leaning heavily on Seligman’s psychological theory of ‘learned helplessness’. Similarly, Eva Lundgren coined the concept ‘the normalisation process’ (2004) to describe how victims gradually come to take the perpetrators’ perspective and to accept the violence as normal. Walker’s reliance on this psychological model with its lack of agency has posed problems for (other) feminists (van Schalkwyk, Boonzaier, & Gobodo-Madikizela, 2014). Hydén (1994) challenged Lundgren’s ‘normalisation theory’, focusing on victims’ resistance and agency, which led to a deep disunity among feminist scholars on DV in Scandinavia.

The theorisation of victim positions in relation to political agency remains important in feminist theorisations of DV. Recently, as a reaction to the increasing professionalisation and subsequent depoliticisation of the field, there has also been a renewed involvement with second-wave feminist theorists with the aim of reclaiming the victim position as a position for political agency in contrast to the passive role as a client to be acted on by the victim services. Mardorosian (2014) invokes Brownmiller’s (1975) argument that women are the victims only of patriarchal oppression, offering a victim position to act from and a victim role that evades the notions of passivity, helplessness and shame that are often associated with it. However, the politicisation of the victim role is not without its problems. Brown (1995) has warned against the reliance on
the state for adjudication of social injury, as it may also spur state responses targeting the groups identified as victims in ways that also imply control and governance.

As DV is increasingly criminalised and seen as non-acceptable, and not compatible with contemporary ideals of masculinity and femininity, being a victim as well as being a perpetrator of DV are stigmatised. In presumed gender-equal Sweden, Hydén (1994) found that her informants felt ashamed over violence-induced bruises as signs of not being loved. A Swedish study of male perpetrators (Gottzén, 2016) found that expressing shame while distancing themselves from the category of ‘violent men’ was important in the self-presentation of men who had been violent to an intimate partner. In racist and inequal South Africa, Boonzaier found that bruises from DV were seen as signs of wrongdoing on the female victim’s part, as the husband’s right to punish her was not questioned. For the black and coloured South African women in her study, the feelings of shame were both related to self-worth and to the position of being abused women vis-à-vis white people (2008; Boonzaier, Lafrance, & McKenzie-Mohr, 2014). Juggling racialised shame and respectability also figures prominently in South African perpetrators’ narratives (van Niekerk, 2019).

Social institutions may both support and undermine victims’ experiences and agency in the context of DV. Salter (2012) argues that the invalidation of female victim’s experiences in a number of institutional contexts, ranging from families to the judicial system, is an important and unrecognised aspect of the gender dynamics of DV. Stark (2007, 2009, 2013), on a more positive note, links victims’ agency to the empowering aspects of the social and cultural context. Trying to explain how the women he met in shelters and forensic contexts had drawn on ‘reservoirs of courage and faith in self-emancipation for which I could find no objective correlate in their situations’, Stark (2009, p. 1524) emphasises the role of the women’s movement and the framework of universal human rights, arguing that these women were in touch with a larger social context in which their right to dignity, freedom, and safety was affirmed. It is this link between the particular predicament they faced and the political movement that allowed them to speak while silenced that Coercive Control tried to strengthen.

(2009, p. 1524)

He proposes ‘to retell the “story” of surviving abuse as part of the larger liberty narrative that goes back to the War of Independence, the U.S. Constitution, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights’ (2009, p. 1524).

**Sexual violence as part of DV**

On one hand, sexual violence has been part of feminist understandings of DV from the outset (Kelly, 1988a). On the other hand, sexual violence and DV are often studied and theorised separately, and despite sexual violence being an important and highly gendered part of DV, it is not routinely included in studies and categories of DV. This is the reason why Walby and Towers (2017) propose that any sexual aspect or sexual motivation should be measured routinely in relation to all acts of violence as part of their proposal to improve survey methodology. The concept of a continuum of sexual violence (Sheffield, 1987; Kelly, 1987, 1988a, 1988b; Smart, 1995) links minor sexual harassment and micro-aggressions in the public sphere which are part of women’s everyday experiences of living in a sexist and patriarchal culture, with other forms of sexual violence, arguing that they shade into each other, creating an atmosphere of fear. The
continuum approach also captures how in the victim’s experience different acts of violence in the context of DV may form one coherent experience, rather than being experienced as separate events. Sørensen (2013) argues that for the victims, distinguishing between sexual violence and other forms of DV did not necessarily make sense: the sexual violence was just part of the whole.

Emerging themes

Mothers and children

Feminist conceptualisation of DV originally focussed on women, but increasingly, children were also brought into the picture, in research that focussed on mothers in the context of custody and visiting arrangements after divorce in the context of DV (Hester & Radford, 1992; Eriksson & Hester, 2001). Increasingly, children were brought into the frame as subjects in their own right (Överlien & Hydén, 2009) and witnessing violence against a caregiver has come to be recognised as harmful and as violence towards the child, even if the child is not directly targeted.

Recently, children’s relations with their mothers in the context of DV have been centred in research (Lapiere et al., 2018; Katz, 2015, 2019). This strand of research presents a picture of complex, varied and often fraught mother-child relations, but also a more positive view of mother-child bonds and children’s agency in the context and aftermath of DV than in previous research which tends to juxtapose mothers’ and children’s interests (Överlien, 2011).

In contrast, research and advocacy regarding custody and visiting arrangements is an important area of anti-feminist backlash, with father’s rights’ advocates mobilising concepts like ‘false memories’ and ‘parental alienation syndrome’, with the aim of invalidating mothers and children’s accounts of violence and abuse. Challenging these concepts and the way they are used has become an increasingly important part of the ongoing struggles regarding DV, gender and parenting (see for instance Thomas & Richardson, 2015).

Reproductive coercion – re-tangling sexual violence and reproductive violence

Violence in pregnancy was first documented by Gelles (1976), and the fact that violence occurs in pregnancy and that pregnancy may represent a heightened risk of DV is now widely recognised (Grace & Anderson, 2018). Over the last few years, the concept reproductive coercion conceptualises a more comprehensive approach to a range of abusive behaviours related to sexuality and reproduction which may take place within an intimate relation, but which are not restricted to intimate relations. States may also be seen as responsible for reproductive coercion, as Kevin and Agutter (2018) have demonstrated in the Australian state’s relations to refugees in the past and today.

Male victims of DV

Male victims – and even more so, female perpetrators – of DV have been a contentious issue in feminist research on DV (Gilbert, 2002; Abrams, 2015). The struggle over numbers in the ‘gender symmetry’ controversy that so long dominated the field may have hampered a more nuanced approach to male victims, and research on male victims tends to be framed in opposition to
the feminist perspective, the existence of male victims often routinely taken as evidence of the insufficiency of the feminist perspective or even proving it wrong (see for example Migliaccio, 2002; Kestell, 2019). In recent years, however, male victims are increasingly studied from a variety of feminist perspectives (Nybergh, Enander, & Krantz, 2016; Venäläinen, 2019; Bjørnholt & Rosten, 2021), acknowledging that there is no antagonism between seeing (heterosexual) men as a minority among victims of DV on one hand, and studying male victims from feminist perspectives.

Transcending the gender and species boundaries

Feminist perspectives also inform recent developments in research and theorising of DV that problematise the gender binary, moving from studying DV in ‘same-sex’ relations to studying DV in a whole range of LBGTI relations (Donovan & Barnes, 2020). Further, studies and theorisations of DV increasingly also encompass non-human family animals. Fitzgerald, Barrett, Stevenson and Cheung (2019) for instance study animal abuse as part of coercive control. Recently, there has also been a rapprochement between these two research strains, as demonstrated by Riggs, Taylor, Fraser, Donovan, and Signal’s study (2018) of DV against non-human animals in LBGTI intimate relations. This widening of the scope of DV research is consistent with feminist research and theorising as an evolving and expanding liberatory project.

How are DV and gender equality related?

An important assumption following from a feminist perspective on DV is that there is a link between DV and gender equality. Subsequently, DV should be expected to decrease with decreasing levels of gender inequality. However, the correlation between levels of DV and levels of gender equality has not been clearly demonstrated in research. The fact that the Nordic countries, despite their high ranking in international gender equality comparisons, still have high levels of DV has recently spurred debates over a possible ‘Nordic paradox’ (Gracia & Merlo, 2016; Gracia, Martín-Fernández, Lila, Merlo, & Ivert, 2019). Although the data on which such claims are based have been criticised (Walby & Towers, 2017), it is still an undisputable fact that DV remains a problem also in the Nordic countries, which may challenge claims of a simple causal relation between the level of gender equality and DV. Another recent approach theorises the relation between gender relations, domination and policy, developing the concept of violence regimes that conceptualises violence as an inequality in its own right (Hearn, Strid, Humbert, Balkmar, & Delauney, 2020).

Anti-feminist backlash

The contemporary illiberal, anti-gender movement also represents a new challenge for feminist perspectives on DV, which have become the target of anti-feminist critiques which include the contestation of DV as an issue, claims of false allegations of DV in the context of custody cases, and contestations of states’ responsibilities to address DV, a revitalisation of the gender symmetry debate and claims of men being equally the victims of DV. When these issues are linked to the political contestation of gender as a concept and gender studies as an academic discipline in many countries, there is reason to worry that the feminist victories in institutionalising states’ responsibilities to address DV as part of a gender equality agenda may be under threat (Walby, 2018; Verloo & Paternotte, 2018).
Conclusion
This chapter elucidates how feminist perspectives on DV may be seen as an ongoing practice of simultaneously theorising and politicising of DV. By highlighting the multiple origins, as well as some formative controversies and emerging themes, spurred by the theoretical and political contributions from black, postcolonial, queer and indigenous feminisms, this chapter presents the feminist perspective on DV as an unfinished project and a work in progress. The chapter, rather than attempting to give an exhaustive overview, mimics the fluidity and multiplicity of the field.

Postscript
As this chapter was being finalised, the Covid-19 pandemic struck, acutely demonstrating the importance and relevance of studying and theorising DV, and the feminist perspective on DV in particular, illustrating and extending several of the topics that have been discussed in this chapter.

DV emerged as one among several factors contributing to the gendered, racial and classed shape of the pandemic, reflecting and elucidating pre-existing social inequalities such as gendered patterns of employment, risk and valuation (Wanqing, 2020; Godin, 2020; the United Nations, 2020a, 2020b). The virus itself and the lockdown strategies also provided perpetrators with new pandemic-specific means of coercive control and threatening behaviours (Gearin & Knight, 2020). The interaction between DV, the infection control measures, and services for victims of DV in the pandemic epitomises the relation between DV and the state. The pandemic had the effect of raising awareness, nationally and internationally to DV as a ‘shadow pandemic’.

With the prospect of a severe economic downturn (the International Monetary Fund, 2020), levels of DV are likely to increase, as Walby and Towers (2012) and Walby et al. (2016) demonstrated in their studies of the effects on DV after the 2009 financial crisis. On a more optimistic tone, the pandemic also revealed the critical and essential importance and value of care and other low-paid and underestimated – gendered, classed and minoritised – work. Further, the unprecedented response to the pandemic, shutting down large parts of the formal economy to save lives, forcefully demonstrated what feminist economists have long argued: people are more important than money (Benaria, Berik, & Floro, 2015), and the aim of the economy is not to maximise monetary value but social provisioning to sustain people (Power, 2004).

The Covid-19 pandemic has reiterated the importance and relevance of feminist, intersectional analyses of various sectors of society and from different disciplinary perspectives, thereby creating new contexts and opportunities for future theorisations and politicisation of DV.

Critical findings
• In the feminist perspective, DV is constituted in and constitutive of gender orders. DV is seen as one among other pillars underpinning and reproducing gender inequality in society.
• Power and control figure prominently in feminist theorisations and research on DV. DV is seen as a liberty crime. Another strain of feminist research on DV focusses on physical violence. In both strains, the attention is directed towards the totality of violence that the victim experiences and consequences for the victim, rather than the individual violent acts.
• The co-development of knowledge and activism has been pivotal in the development of feminist theory, community responses and policies of DV. The feminist theorisation of DV relies on theorising from experience, placing victim’s voices at the core of theory and
practice. Black feminism, queer, postcolonial and indigenous feminisms have played and play crucial roles in the theorisation, critique, dialogue, expansion and research on DV. The feminist theorisation of DV is an ongoing and evolving practice.

- Feminist perspectives on DV have influenced policies and legislation, but the feminist perspective on DV as well as states’ responsibilities to address DV are also contested. On one hand, international and state actors have adopted responsibility for addressing DV. On the other hand, political backlashes in some countries and growing resistance against gender equality and gender theory have also led to contestations of states’ responsibility to address DV.

**Implications for policy, practice and research**

- Researchers on DV need to recognise the multiplicity of past and contemporary feminist perspectives on DV.
- There is a need for policymakers and researchers to recognise the legacy and the continued importance of feminist theorisations, advocacy and practical activism in community responses to DV.
- In the contemporary context of political backlashes against gender equality, gender theory and state responsibility to address DV, it is important to politically defend and consolidate past feminist victories in terms of legislation and institutions addressing DV.

**References**


DV and abuse through a feminist lens


Kestell, B. (2019). Against me(n): *Accounting for oneself as a male victim of intimate partner abuse in a discrediting context* (PhD dissertation). The School of Nursing and Human Sciences, Dublin City University.


DV and abuse through a feminist lens


