

A left realist approach to antifeminist fathers' rights groups

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Published online: 23 July 2010
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Abstract Despite earlier critiques of left realists' failure to adequately address feminist concerns, recent left realist theorizing and empirical research have made valuable contributions to the understanding of woman abuse and other forms of gendered violence. Left realism has further potential to contribute to the criminological understanding of woman abuse and its contributing socioeconomic and cultural contexts. This article describes left realists' early efforts to include gender in analyses of crime. It then summarizes feminist critiques of left realism and reviews the work that has responded to them. Drawing upon two prominent strands of feminist left realist theorizing about violence and gender, the paper proposes a preliminary left realist theory of antifeminist fathers' rights group activism. It then outlines a provisional research agenda on antifeminist fathers' rights groups, and proposes short and long term policies and practices to enhance the safety of abused mothers and their children following divorce or separation.

Introduction

Left realism continues to hold significant untapped potential for understanding the causes, nature, outcomes, and responses to violence against women in a holistic fashion. If critical criminologists want to move beyond “so what criminology” [59] to construct a “public criminology” [19], we need to continue to focus our attention away from counting decontextualized, de-gendered “hits” to understanding the causes of violence as well as the pragmatic conditions which disproportionately entrap women in abusive relationships [21, 23, 32, 35]. This article briefly reviews feminist critiques of left realism and responses to them and makes the case for a left realist approach to understanding antifeminist “fathers' rights” (FR) activism. It

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proposes a preliminary left realist theory of FR activism, and outlines a provisional research and policy agenda to advance the safety of abused women.

Brian MacLean and Dragan Milovanovic described the core goal of left realism as constructing “an empirically-based alternative knowledge of crime and policing phenomena that can be advanced and defended in the political arena against the conservative agenda...” [56, p. 17]. Antifeminist FR groups provide a key location for this kind of intervention. Critical criminologists should pay attention to FR groups because they are having a negative impact on battered mothers’ ability to protect themselves and their children from abuse. In particular, FR groups have lobbied legislatures to promote family law policies that are harmful to abused women and their children, sued to eliminate services tailored to abused women, and aggressively promoted the idea that women are as violent as men in relationships [2, 5, 42, 57, 68, 79]. Jennifer Hardesty [45] has observed that compartmentalized research efforts have led to a failure to integrate the literatures on violence against women and divorce. A left realist approach can facilitate the empirical and theoretical integration that is necessary to improve abused mothers’ safety. As critical criminologists have observed, left realism has often been relegated to the margins of criminology [86], as well as critiqued from the left and the right [29]. It has, however, also been fruitfully adopted by scholars working on issues as diverse as street crime, woman abuse, and crime in public housing.

Feminist critiques of left realism

If critical criminologies have been marginalized, feminist critical criminologies have been more so. Martin Schwartz and Walter DeKeseredy argued in 1991 that “Perhaps the place where the left realists may be weakest is in response to a feminist critique” [p. 51]. Feminist scholars have raised theoretical and methodological questions about left realism [1, 11, 16, 22, 41, 85]. Left idealism, cultural studies, and right realism, have all been criticized for focusing their attention squarely in the “boyzone” of the public, the state, and male working class culture [9, p. 275]. In their 1988 overview of feminism and criminology in Britain, Loraine Gelsthorpe and Allison Morris argued that “[m]ainstream has effectively remained ‘malestream’” [internal citation omitted, 41, p. 96].

Feminist research on men’s violence against women is credited by some left realists with pushing critical criminologists toward the recognition that crime is a serious problem for its victims, rather than simply a manifestation of heroic resistance to capitalism [22, 60, 65, 87]. For example, Jock Young argued in 1988 that “The importance of feminist work in the recent development of radical criminology cannot be overestimated” because “It has, in short, been the major contributor to the contemporary radical practice of exposing the invisible victim” [87, p. 301].

Insights from feminist research, notably Diana Russell’s work on rape in marriage [72], were consciously incorporated into the Islington Crime Surveys, as well as more recent work on woman abuse in various contexts [24, 33, 65]. In keeping with the goal of taking crime seriously, and in response to the “enormous theoretical problems” that feminist research posed for gender-blind left criminology, the authors

of the Islington Crime Surveys sought to counter government efforts to paint public concerns about crime, and especially women's fear of crime, as irrational. In order to accomplish this, the studies asked questions designed to measure women's fear of crime; the extent of their victimization by crime in the home as well as in the street; women's risk reduction behaviors; and the effects of men's violence against female intimates [49].

Despite these early efforts, feminists have made several critiques of left realist scholarship. The most serious critique is that much left realist scholarship continues to ignore gender altogether. As DeKeseredy and Schwartz [this issue] observe, Roger Matthews' 1987 argument for "Taking realist criminology seriously" omitted any mention of women or feminism [58]. Twenty two years later, his invitation to a left realist criminology that is more engaged with public policy is similarly inattentive to feminist concerns [59]. These examples indicate that for some criminologists, even those who consider themselves to be progressive, gender issues are marginal, at best.

A second version of the feminist critique is that left realists have only paid lip service to addressing feminist concerns. Schwartz and DeKeseredy observed that, "it is not uncommon for authors to make a few passing nods in the direction of how important feminist concerns and critiques are. Once that nod is over, those concerns do [not] arise again in the proposals for change" [74, p. 62]. In other words, while it is perhaps more common today than twenty years ago for left realists to make reference to the need to address violence against women at home or in the streets, only a handful of scholars have contributed to the discussion about what this might look like within a left realist approach. Instead, left realist critiques of "get tough policing" and "law and order politics" often sit uneasily alongside the caveat that, of course, violence against women is an exception to this rule.

For example, Sandra Walklate [85] noted that Richard Kinsey, John Lea, and Jock Young [53] treated woman abuse as an exceptional crime in the context of their overarching call for minimal policing based on community standards. The fact that that the community may not take violence against women seriously, or agree about what that would mean, reveals serious questions about the logistics of local, community based approaches to policing. Other left realists have pointed out that bracketing off violence against women as an exceptional crime demanding serious state intervention is theoretically unsatisfactory and pragmatically questionable in the context of calls for the mitigation of punitive, criminal justice-based forms of social control [74].

A third feminist critique is that left realist work lacks serious attention to the concept of patriarchy, preferring to treat women's concerns as adjuncts to class problems. Left realist suggestions that crime is primarily an outgrowth of capitalism and response to relative economic deprivation cannot account for the omnipresence of violence against women, or the fact that women, although poorer than men, commit far less crime [44, 85]. Likewise, simply adding sex as a variable in crime surveys risks conflating sex and gender and avoiding serious consideration of patriarchy as a factor in crime and responses to it [44].

In methodological critiques, feminist scholars have questioned whether improved, quantitative victimization studies are able to "adequately capture and convey women's experiences of criminal victimization" [85, p. 72]. Improved victimization

surveys may well find more victimization and worse outcomes for women than do official crime statistics, thereby documenting previously uncounted criminal acts. However, demonstrating the seriousness of violence against women over and over again in this way is necessary, but not sufficient to help the feminist cause of calling for broad based social and economic changes to prevent violence. Indeed, as we have seen in the United States, funding for violence against women programs has intentionally and explicitly focused on improving policing, prosecution, and emergency shelter services. Although these remedies may be effectual in achieving specific short term goals, they can also effectively skirt the issue of patriarchy as a contributing factor to violence.

The left realist response

Although early left realist scholarship has been repeatedly criticized for failing to adequately engage with feminism [1, 11, 16, 22, 25, 65, 74, 85], the integrated nature of left realist theory is highly compatible with feminist scholarship, and recent work has fruitfully engaged both approaches. Indeed, violence against women is one of the most vibrant areas of contemporary left realist inquiry, and left realists have developed, tested, and refined feminist theories of woman abuse [24–26, 65]. To date, left realists have investigated violence and gender in a North London neighborhood [65]; woman abuse in urban public housing estates in Canada [26, 31]; corporate violence against Canadian women [28]; separation assault against women in rural Ohio [33]; and woman abuse on college and university campuses in the United States and Canada [22, 30, 75]. These studies have already begun to answer several feminist critiques including the failure to theorize patriarchy; the need for mixed methods to acquire broad and deep data; consideration of a broader variety of forms of woman abuse; the need to develop and test theories of woman abuse; and the need to look at woman abuse across marital status variations [22, p. 266–267].

The case for a feminist, left realist approach to the study of antifeminist fathers' rights groups

To this point, left realist scholarship on violence against women has primarily focused on empirically documenting the incidence, prevalence, and impact of the crime, especially in under-studied contexts, and constructing and testing theories about its contributing factors. This research has yielded many valuable insights about the nature and causes of violence and abuse, and the importance of contributing contextual factors such as relative deprivation, *laissez-faire* economic policies, and patriarchal peer support for violence and abuse [DeKeseredy & Schwartz, this issue, 26, 31, 64, 65]. However, opportunities for left realist work remain in some of the most pressing areas for abused women.

For example, although Elliott Currie has begun to explore the relationship between family dynamics and crime [17–19], noting the logical fallacies of conservative invocations of family values, this work has not investigated the highly gendered politics of families, family law, or violence. Jayne Mooney has also

analyzed the problems with conservative claims that it is the breakdown of nuclear, heterosexual families per se that causes crime [64]. However, while Mooney discusses Erin Pizzey's false claims about feminist research in general and Mooney's UK study of gendered violence in particular, she does not discuss Pizzey's connection to FR activism [65]. Finally, while DeKeseredy, Schwartz and colleagues have articulated theories of patriarchal peer support for woman abuse, including in the context of the backlash against feminism, and separation assault, their work has not discussed FR activism in the context of divorce.

Abused mothers report being forced into joint custody and visitation with their abusers, or losing custody to them altogether in family court proceedings [3, 20, 77, 78]. This family court dynamic effectively prevents many abused women from being able to safely separate from their abuser, coercing them into frequent, ongoing contact with their abusers until their children are at least 18 years old [68, 79]. Participants in the study *Battered mothers speak out: A human rights report on domestic violence and child custody in the Massachusetts courts* [20, 77, 78] described the impact of their experiences in the family courts. One mother said, "I don't think there is a worse thing in the world than not being able to protect your children. Like someone got my hands tied behind my back and I'm watching them beaten up, and I can't protect them." Another mother commented, "It's absolutely crazy-making to not be permitted to protect your own child...to send her [on visits], to see her being abused and not be able to do anything about it." Another said, "I can't stress enough how awful it is, how awful it is to be battered... and not to be able to get away from that, to go to a court and have them give you more of the same—not only not protect you from it, but give you more of the same" [77, p. 955].

The reports of abused mothers are supported by empirical research on child custody and visitation in the context of abusive relationships. Jennifer Hardesty and Grace Chung's review of the literature noted that although joint custody and "cooperative coparenting" are frequently dangerous for abused mothers, histories of violence are often marginalized by the family courts [46]. Jennifer Hardesty and Lawrence Ganong found that abusive men continued abusive and controlling behavior in the context of custody and visitation post-divorce [47]. Survivors noted that abusers used popular ideas about "broken homes" causing juvenile delinquency to manipulate the mothers, and that survivors were influenced by popular ideologies about "fatherlessness" to continue ongoing contact between their abusers and their children, despite the fact that "...continued father involvement meant continued fear" [47, p. 553]. The National Domestic Violence Fatality Review Initiative has also decisively linked child custody disputes to domestic homicides, noting that custody disputes and related issues are one of their "four common themes for recommendations in domestic homicide review" [66].

David Greatbatch and Robert Dingwall found that domestic violence is often marginalized in divorce mediation, even when reported as an issue by abused mothers [43]. Nancy Johnson, Dennis Saccuzzo and Wendy Koen found that divorce mediators failed to recognize or report domestic violence in more than half of cases where it was indicated, even when they screened for it [48]. Leora Rosen and Cris O'Sullivan (2005) found that even when protection orders were in place against them, abusive men received visitation in 64% of cases [70]. Rosen and O'Sullivan noted that "...fathers who were restrained from contact with their expartners through an OP were at an

advantage when it came to securing court-ordered visitation with the children that they had in common with their expartners” [p. 1066]. Although mediation is contraindicated for domestic violence cases [76], Carl Tishler, Suzanne Bartholomae, Bonnie Katz, and Laura Landry-Meyer found that approximately one-third of the couples in their mediation study reported a history of domestic violence [83]. In that study, women (21.2%) were much more likely than men (4.2%) to report domestic violence [p. 1051]. Violence cases also more frequently involved defaults on child support payments.

About antifeminist fathers’ rights groups

Antifeminist men’s groups developed alongside feminism [12, 63]. Various groups formed in response to a combination of factors including family law reforms around the liberalization of divorce, the feminist movement, and the battered women’s movement [4, 6, 7, 12, 14, 15, 34, 42, 50, 57, 62, 69]. Michael Messner [63] and Michael Kimmel [51] have catalogued the various approaches of different groups in the “men’s movement,” including multiple pro-feminist and antifeminist variants. Many antifeminist “men’s rights” groups were retooled as “fathers’ rights” groups during the 1990s.

Following the successes of the feminist movement in popularizing the idea of women’s rights, the institution of state-sponsored child support collection, and widespread endorsement of efforts to address violence against women, antifeminist men’s groups required a different approach which didn’t directly attack women’s right to protection from violent husbands or children’s entitlement to support. Family law provided a suitable location for this refocused antifeminist activism [5–7, 34]. Drawing upon popular narratives about divorce, “fatherlessness,” and crime as points of cultural crisis, antifeminist groups tapped into mainstream efforts touting the reinforcement of the heterosexual, patriarchal family as the cure of social ills ranging from dropping out to drug taking and perpetration of violent crime [64].

Early empirical work has indicated that FR groups coalesce around lobbying efforts in favor of the elimination of child support, the characterization of women and children’s reports of violence as false, and claims that men are the *real* victims of domestic violence [34, 35, 50, 62, 69]. Scholars have noted the disconnect between the public and private priorities of the groups [4], their efforts to affect law and policy, and their achievement of mixed results in these areas [5, 7, 35, 42, 57].

Some FR groups take pains to present themselves publicly as comprised of caring dads, who don’t hate women or feminists. These groups often choose lobbying and legal tactics to attack services for abused women, laws criminalizing domestic violence, and family law policies intended to ameliorate mothers’ disproportionate poverty at divorce. Others sell products to help men “Attack, Attack, Attack—Tactics That Win!” For example, the Foundation for Fathers Rights website sells information about how to minimize child support, how to fight “false allegations” of abuse, and how to stop a divorce [38]. Despite claims by these groups that patriarchy is a thing of the past, and the state is now dominated by feminists, the talk and tactics of FR groups point directly to the importance of what radical feminists identified as the pillars of patriarchal control of women: violence against women, reproduction, and economics [8, 34, 73].

In their quantitative study of 285 FR websites, Leora Rosen, Molly Dragiewicz, and Jennifer Gibbs found three factors which captured the dominant themes, “representing domestic violence allegations as false, promoting presumptive joint custody and decreasing child support, and portraying women as perpetrators of domestic abuse” [69, p. 528]. These factors highlight a three part approach to rolling back the hard-won gains of the feminist movement by attacking informal social and formal structural targets.

Despite the extreme positions of many FR groups, their efforts to undermine feminist interventions in woman abuse and family law parallel popular and scholarly iterations of backlash [34]. FR claims about the “gender symmetry” of violence in relationships [71] rely on decontextualized statistics produced by criminologists [36, 37, 39, 52, 80–82] who proclaim the apolitical nature of their research, yet collaborate with antifeminist FR groups [23, 27, 32]. For example, the National Family Violence Legislative Resource Center is a lobbying organization comprised primarily of FR advocates and sympathetic criminologists working to promote the idea that “family violence” is not a gendered phenomenon, and that the consideration of a history of violence at custody determination results in discrimination against men [67].

A preliminary left realist theory of FR activism

In one variant of left realist theorizing on woman abuse, DeKeseredy, Schwartz and colleagues argue that economically marginalized men experience relative deprivation as threatening to their ability to achieve hegemonic masculinity. As economic conditions deteriorate under capitalism, the risk of violence is exacerbated by unemployment, especially for poor men of color. The resulting alienation leads to the formation of subcultures which craft alternate routes to the achievement of hegemonic masculinity, including through the use of violence. These subcultures provide patriarchal peer support for abusive behaviors toward women. Violence-supportive beliefs are tied to a proprietary view of women (see for example DeKeseredy & Schwartz, this issue, 26, 31, 33). Significantly, this strand of left realist theory combines macro level factors affecting men’s ability to achieve a specific form of masculinity and micro level factors such as beliefs and attitudes that help to explain abusive behavior. Indeed, DeKeseredy and Schwartz’s peer support models emphasize that stress stems in part from the disconnect between reality and abusive men’s beliefs about what ideal relationships with women should look like.

Another left realist approach stresses that woman abuse is both common and accepted even in the mainstream. Mooney’s results call into question the idea that marginalized subcultures experience dramatically higher levels of woman abuse [65]. Her results found less inter- class and race/ethnicity variation than did DeKeseredy et al. [26]. In Mooney’s study, 32% of the women reported violence from a partner in their lifetime [65, p. 161]. Mooney also found that similarly sizeable minorities of women and men endorsed statements identifying contexts where men’s violence against women is likely. For example, 29% of the men in Mooney’s sample reported that they would be likely to hit their partner if she had sex with a close friend of his. In addition, 28% of the men said they would be likely to

hit their partner if she had sex with someone unknown to him [p. 182]. In the same study, 34% of women thought it likely their partner would hit them if they had sex with a close friend of his, and 30% thought it likely their partner would hit them if they had sex with someone unknown to him [p. 186]. Women were actually slightly more likely than men to describe such hitting as justified. Mooney argues that these results point to widespread knowledge and acceptance by men and women of parameters for women's gendered behavior, beyond which violence is expected or even acceptable.

Drawing upon these two strands of left realism, a preliminary theory of FR groups can be proposed. FR groups' dual focus on efforts to eliminate child support on the one hand, and attack resources for abused women on the other, suggests that many FR group members experience divorce as socially and economically marginalizing. These marginalized men seek out like-minded peers in person and online, drawing upon and adapting mainstream discourses around families, violence, and gender to reassert patriarchal masculinity in the face of challenges [15, 34, 62, 69].

FR groups arose in the United States in response to changes in economic security that span class divisions. These economic threats come not just from the restructuring of the labor market and increased frequency of divorce, but also from retrenchment schemes that have off-loaded income support for mothers onto individual men through state-supported child support collection efforts. Collection efforts targeting the non-custodial parents of children receiving welfare began in 1950 via the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program. In 1975, Congress established the Child Support Enforcement (CSE) and Paternity Establishment Programs,

to reduce public expenditures on welfare by obtaining support from noncustodial parents on an ongoing basis, to help non-AFDC families get support so they could stay off public assistance, and to establish paternity for children born outside marriage so child support could be obtained for them. [13]

In 1996, child support collection efforts were stepped up once again when AFDC was replaced with the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program. Public Law 104–193, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), made many major changes to child support at the federal level, including

requiring States to increase the percentage of noncustodial parents identified, establishing an integrated, automated network linking all States to information about the location and assets of parents, requiring States to implement more enforcement techniques, and revising the rules governing the distribution of past due (arrearage) child support payments to former recipients of public assistance. [13]

Most importantly, states were required to establish child support enforcement programs which met these and other federal guidelines to receive the block-grant funds for PRWORA beginning in 1996. This was a powerful incentive for states to follow federal guidelines for aggressive child support collection efforts.

Cumulatively, these developments have produced structural and social changes that provide a context essential to understanding the development of FR groups.

Collection of child support from unwilling non-custodial parents is much more likely than in the past. States now have the power to collect support on behalf of custodial parents. The formulae for calculating child support amounts are now standardized by state, decreasing the likelihood that non-custodial parents can bargain, threaten, or ignore their way out of paying support [84]. Finally, child support collection efforts moved beyond the poor fathers who had been previously targeted into the middle and upper classes. These factors help to explain FR groups' emphasis on child support.

However, FR group members' concern with child support plays out within the parameters of widespread ideas about personal responsibility on the part of fathers. For example, FR groups object to the term "deadbeat dads" which calls into question both men's economic status as breadwinners and their social status as family patriarchs who are in control of, and respected by, their family members. FR group members want to eliminate child support, but know that it is not politically popular to tell people that they don't want to support their own children. FR group members assist one another in constructing alternative narratives to explain their reluctance to financially support their children. Since it is politically unpopular to attack children, these accounts focus instead on their ex wives' behavior and the men's preeminent social status as fathers. Accounts focused on their wives draw upon many of the same patriarchal and abuse-supportive attitudes and beliefs documented by left realists [26, 65]. Since these accounts are often exaggerated, we can look at FR complaints about their ex-wives and read off of them normative abuse-supportive attitudes that, in toned down versions, are so pervasive and taken for granted that we no longer notice them.

FR groups do not draw their membership from the most socioeconomically marginalized groups of men. Virtually all of the visible members of FR groups are white. In Jocelyn Crowley's interview study of 158 FR group members, 85% were male, and 87% were white. The subsample who identified the battered women's movement as their political opponents were even more disproportionately white and male (92.5%). In addition, Crowley's respondents reported that they were highly educated, with 30% of the total sample and 37% of those who identified the battered women's movement as their opponents claiming they had graduate degrees. Crowley's respondents also overwhelmingly reported white collar jobs. Of her sample, 80% of men who said the battered women's movement was their political opponent reported white collar jobs, and only 5% said they were unemployed, students, or volunteers [15].

Indeed, since child support amounts are calculated based on income [84], it is unlikely that those in the lowest income brackets would be motivated to mobilize against child support collection. So, although antifeminist FR groups seek out and establish peer subcultures supportive of familial patriarchy, they do not appear to be absolutely economically deprived. Instead, their articulations of deprivation point to relative deprivation and the erosion of masculine privilege [34]. FR group members characterize child support amounts as excessive, and their ex wives as undeserving of financial assistance due to gendered role transgressions such as being promiscuous, selfish, gold-diggers, bad mothers, false-accusers, or violent [34, 62, 69].

Woman abuse is often a precipitating cause of divorce, which is the catalyst for child support collection [45, 46, 54, 83]. Since child support is usually paid to mothers due to their relative poverty, it redistributes economic resources from men to

women who are no longer providing productive or reproductive service to them. This arrangement removes abused mothers' accountability to abusive fathers, potentially undermining their coercive control. In addition, a history of violence is a factor in custody determination in most states, and several states adjust child support for time spent with the non-custodial parent [84]. As a result, a person's record as a perpetrator of violence is one of the primary potential barriers to decreasing child support. As Dragiewicz argued, a compromised ability to increase custody time to decrease child support may in fact be the most significant negative outcome for many fathers reported for woman abuse [34].

With the passage of the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) in 1994, the United States institutionalized a hegemonic ideological position against men's violence against women. Located as it was within an Omnibus Crime Bill (Public Law 103–322), VAWA explicitly represented a federal commitment to addressing men's violence against women as a national crime control problem. Funding for police training to increase arrest, and funding to promote the prosecution of domestic violence crimes, helped to establish that domestic violence was a serious issue for law and order. Many advocates for abused women applauded VAWA as a signal of the seriousness of violence against women as a crime, in stark contrast to the widespread earlier practice of dismissing men's violence against female intimates as private, personal, and beyond the purview of police intervention or prosecution [10, 40, 61].

FR groups have railed against VAWA, complaining that it oppresses men by privileging women's accounts of violence, allegedly turning the power of the state into a feminist tool to be used against innocent men, with dire consequences for human civilization [34]. For example, "Jerry" wrote on the Male Matters blog, "by practically federalizing and institutionalizing the idea that men are bad and women are good, VAWA can only fuel the anger between the sexes and hence *may increase the potential for the very violence VAWA seeks to eliminate*" [original emphasis, 55]. Likewise, the FR website DADI claimed,

[a]s men and families are demonized by the radical gender feminists—such as they are in that stellar example of feminist fiction, HR 182 (VAWA): "Expressing the sense of Congress with respect to child custody, child abuse, and victims of domestic and family violence."—the criminalization of men, the disintegration of the family, and the growth of socialism in America will continue to prosper. [71]

In Crowley's study of FR group members, 25% of respondents identified battered women's groups as their political adversaries. In the same study, 61% of respondents talked about domestic violence despite not being asked about it. Many of the men claimed they had been falsely accused, offering dubious accounts of events leading to the imposition of supervised visitation or orders of protection against them [15]. For example,

[This local domestic violence group taught my ex-wife] how to manipulate things in such a way that you are not seeing the other side of it... Let's put it this way, they teach [women] how to dial 911 and at the time that they make their phone call, to pinch their arms so that they have bruises on their arms so that when the police officers get there, they see marks and bruises.... [15, p. 742].

FR group members in the study claimed that battered women's shelters advise women to injure themselves in order to secure fraudulent orders for protection against men in order to receive custody of children at divorce, thereby gaining child support awards [15]. The crux of FR objections to VAWA and other responses to gendered violence is that they address the inequities which render individual women vulnerable through collective action supported by the state. FR activism in response to VAWA thus illustrates the connections between federal policy, as enacted in the states, and individual abusive relationships. These individual men appear to experience and react to the states' provision of law enforcement and emergency resources to abused women in a very personal way.

Policing, welfare, employment, transportation, housing, and child care policies undeniably shape abused mothers' experiences of violence. These policies are also inextricably tied to family law polices and processes around child custody and access. While fiscal retrenchment may have negative impacts on minority status men as earners, with implications for masculine identity, criminologists also need to pay attention to the ways libertarian social policy affects men at all levels of the social ecology. Privatizing the costs of child care from the state to the relatively privileged, higher-earning parent at divorce has created additional forms of resistance in response to developing threats to familial patriarchy. In addition to looking at deprivation relative to other groups of men, criminologists need to understand the influence of white patriarchal privilege, and the role of entitlement to heterosexual service and female subordination, in the production of violence. While relative economic deprivation may well push men into peer groups supportive of woman abuse, FR groups suggest that other social factors are also important. FR group members appear to be very concerned with relative deprivation in comparison with their ex wives, who they feel benefit undeservedly from child support.

Future directions for research and policy

Research on antifeminist FR groups is in its infancy. A left realist research agenda would focus on systematic evaluation of the groups' claims and tactics as well as gathering the extant research refuting their claims and arguments. Although many FR groups make inflammatory statements, these are exaggerations of mainstream arguments from the right, so marshalling quality research would serve to address the strong and weak versions of the claims. Although there have been several studies of FR groups [4, 6, 7, 14, 15, 34, 42, 50, 56, 61, 68], most of these have been qualitative. There has never been a survey of FR group members. Such a study would present methodological issues as the groups are small and distant from one another, so the study would likely have to be based on online communities rather than geographic ones. A survey of antifeminist FR group members could include existing measures of beliefs about familial patriarchy and woman abuse.

In addition to surveys, further systematic research on FR websites and other documents would provide insight into their activities and beliefs. Comparisons with other discourses could shed light on the extent of hegemonic patriarchal support for violence. Research could also include studies of the women affected by FR group members. Such research could systematically document FR group tactics and impact

on women and their children. Another key area for research is in the family justice system. There is no system of record collection or analysis to track what is happening to abused mothers in family court. However, there is a wealth of data available in the form of court documents. Finally, studies of the children affected by FR groups are essential. The family studies literature on divorce and separation mostly fails to consider violence and abuse. Criminologists can contribute to cross-disciplinary dialogue in this area that is key for crime as well as for all family members' well-being.

In addition to the need for research, a range of immediate interventions in policy and practice would be helpful to ameliorate the harmful impact of FR activism. Family law policies and practices facilitate many of the problems that FR activism is exacerbating. Changes such as the following could be useful for harm reduction in the short term:

- Disconnecting child support from visitation time,
- prioritization of women and children's safety over men's access and control at divorce,
- taking violence and abuse seriously in the family court,
- debunking myths about "fatherlessness," crime, and other negative social outcomes.

Of course, lasting change to decrease and prevent woman abuse will depend on broad based social and structural adjustments. These might include:

- Challenging patriarchal masculinity,
- affordable housing
- subsidized child care,
- liveable minimum wage,
- income support programs that serve women as well as men's needs, recognizing women's disproportionate role as breadwinners in single parent families.

Conclusion

In sum, left realist work has provided promising directions for understanding the landscape of woman abuse beyond the criminal justice system. FR groups provide a vital location for exploring the influence of formal and informal factors in producing this form of crime. In order to be true to the realities of crime in general and the experiences of abused women in particular, it is necessary to broaden our focus beyond the criminal justice system primarily connoted by references to law and order. Jeanne Gregory argued that in order to understand the impact of law,

we have to look beyond the criminal law and consider the economic and ideological implications of other areas of law. In terms of its day to day impact on working class families, legislation relating to marital breakdown, unemployment benefit and social security payments is undoubtedly a more effective mechanism for effecting discipline and reinforcing the sexual division of labour than is the criminal law. [44, p. 68]

Gregory's observation holds for the abused mothers affected by antifeminist FR group activism. Woman abuse and child abuse are dealt with administratively in a mind-bogglingly complex web of formal justice processes. An abused mother may grapple with the criminal court, civil court, domestic violence court, or family court systems in the process of attempting to protect herself and her children from her abuser. Not infrequently, non-court based systems like child protective services also become involved. Other administrative arms of the state, including food stamps, housing, welfare, and health care may also come into play. Of course, informal norms regarding gender, violence, and "family values" permeate all of these proceedings. Criminologists have an obligation to answer abused mothers' calls for attention to their problems with child custody following separation from abusers. Left realism provides a theoretical and empirical framework to inform, organize, and guide such efforts.

Acknowledgements I would like to thank the reviewers and the editors of this special issue for reviewing drafts of this paper and offering extraordinarily helpful feedback and suggestions.

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