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Unraveling the gender paradox at the center of the Safe & Together Model

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Is the Safe & Together Model a gender-based violence approach or is it an approach that is gender-neutral, meaning it is applicable across multiple situations, including women's use of violence against men and domestic violence in same-sex relationships? The answer is yes to both. How can the Model be gendered and non-gendered at the same time? The Model accomplishes this by combining:

1. A rigorous behavioral focus on the perpetrator's pattern and the survivor's protective efforts,
2. Gendered analysis related to parenting expectations, and
3. Consideration of the unique situation, family structure, intersecting issues, cultural and socio-economic context in each case.

This three-legged approach provides an accurate, flexible and responsive domestic violence policy and practice framework which can react to diverse situations. This paper will explore how gendered versus non-gendered approaches are falsely dichotomized, the power of a perpetrator pattern-based approach to work across diverse situations, and the need to maintain a gendered analysis of parenting expectations in order to achieve accuracy in assessments and interventions.

Gendered or non-gendered: a false dichotomy

Often gendered and non-gendered frameworks for domestic violence are pitted against each other as if they represent two mutually exclusive universes. This does not need to be the case.

The approach needs to account for the existence of wider structural forces such as homophobia, racism, anti-immigrant sentiment, and the impact of colonization. Fairness requires an approach that can respond to differences, complexities and less common scenarios like women's use of coercive control against male or female partners. It needs to be able to connect the dots between domestic violence as an issue to other problems like substance abuse and trauma. Finally, it needs to be able to encourage effective engagement with all family members, guide the development

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of interventions that will improve the outcomes for the family, help shape meaningful legal processes, and guide collaboration between systems. The Safe & Together Model strives to meet all these criteria.

A rigorous behavioral focus on the perpetrator's pattern and the survivors' protective efforts

To be useful, a domestic violence assessment and practice approach needs to be accurate, rigorous and holistic. Because domestic violence by definition is a behavioral problem, the foundation of any meaningful approach needs to be the assessment of the perpetrator's pattern of coercive control and its impact on the functioning of the adult and child survivors, and the family. This pattern-based approach makes it easier to understand how the perpetrator's behaviors diminish other family members' self-determination, sense of safety and satisfaction. The approach also needs to be accurate, rigorous and holistic regarding the survivor's safety efforts including protective efforts related to the children.

The Safe & Together Model focuses on "how" and "what" which helps make the impact of these behaviors easier to identify than if the conversation remained at the level of jargon like "history of abuse" or even "she controls who her partner sees."

Gendered analysis related to parenting expectations

A commitment to accuracy, rigor and holism requires a gender analysis of parenting expectations of men and women. Within systems and cultures that have very different standards for men and women as parents, it would be tantamount to malpractice to ignore something that shapes every aspect of policy and practice when considering the impact of domestic violence perpetration on children. These differing expectations of men and women as parents - higher for women than men - occur across diverse communities and cannot be ignored as it shapes how we identify the problem and where we seek the solutions. Practitioners, through their assessment questions and formulations of cases, identify mothers as being responsible for most or all the day-to-day functioning of the household, effectively rendering invisible many of the effects of fathers' choices and behaviors on their children's lives. When it is applied to the scenario of a heterosexual couple where the male partner has a history of coercive control, mothers are often blamed for the results of the father's abusive behavior like missed days at school, children's behavioral issues, unstable housing and even the actual witnessing of the father's violence toward her.

Low expectations for men as parents is one of the unspoken foundations of mother-blaming practices and it influences almost every piece of work done with families in social work and court settings. Because women are held more responsible for the day-to-day care and well-being of children, abusive fathers are often not tagged with the full responsibility of the harm their behavior causes to children. This unconscious gendered lens has led to destructive, inaccurate and incomplete assessments that are often framed around the allegations against the survivor of "failure to protect," instead of responsibility for harm to the children being placed on the perpetrator. No approach to domestic violence and children that doesn't directly tackle gender double standards can lay claim to being accurate, rigorous or holistic.

Consideration of the unique situation, family structure, intersecting issues, culture and socio-economic context in each case

At the same time, fairness and a commitment to recognizing diversity requires a framework that considers each family, without pre-judgment, and offers documented evidence for the assessment using facts related to behaviors. While gendered parenting expectations and differing levels of social and economic power play a critical role in outlining many of the relevant dynamics in intimate partner violence in heterosexual relationships, it does not encapsulate the totality of what is important in understanding the risks associated with domestic violence perpetrators or the dynamics across diverse communities and contexts. Domestic violence-informed practice requires an approach that works across multiple situations including men's abuse toward women, women's abuse toward men and abuse in same-sex relationships. The Model's focus on the pattern of the perpetrator's behaviors works in identifying harm in diverse families, regardless of sex, gender, sexual orientation, culture and ethnicity.

A behavioral approach - Focus on the "how" and the "what' more than the "why"

Behaviorally-specific questions facilitate fairness, accuracy, rigor and holism regardless of family composition or culture and move past jargon and assumptions. For example, it is not enough to say "x person was controlling and abusive to y person." The specifics need to be fleshed out through questions that focus more on the "how" and the "what' than the "why." It is only by focusing on the "how" and the "what" of the abusive behaviors, e.g., "How did she stop her partner from going to work?" are we able to get a clear picture of the situation. Implicit in the exploration of "how" and "what" is the ability to separate relationship "normal" relationship problems from patterns

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of abuse. Threats to take someone to court for child support are different from threats to kill or kidnap children. Both may be labeled "threatening" behavior but one represents someone's expression to use legal remedies while the other reflects an attempt to create fear for fundamental physical and emotional safety. The Safe & Together Model focuses on "how" and "what" which helps make the impact of these behaviors easier to identify than if the conversation remained at the level of jargon like "history of abuse" or even "she controls who her partner sees."

Behavioral Details Make All the Difference

By asking 'how' and 'what' questions, we get the behavioral details that help us see, with greater clarity, the results of those behaviors. By asking the question, "How does she control who her partner sees?" the answer might be:

"Every time he visits friends and family, she shows up within ten minutes, says she just happened to be in the area and wants to say hi. Usually, within a few minutes, she indicates to him that they need to leave, begins to pace, and if he doesn't leave quickly she begins to curse under her breath about him and his friends and family. One time, after finding him with his family, she destroyed all his pictures of him with his family, saying, "I'm your family now." This level of detail helps us more accurately understand the abuse and identify its impacts regardless of the gender of the person engaging in the behavior.

This exploration of "how" illuminates the pervasive nature of her attempts to interfere with his support network, the intimidation associated with it, and points to a significant level of surveillance. In keeping this focus on "what" and "how," it becomes easier to assess what the impacts of those behaviors have been through a similar focus on the survivor's behaviors.

Questions to Learn More About Impact

To better learn the impact, in the prior example, we might ask:

- "How did your partner's behaviors, like showing up at all friends' houses, affect your relationships with them?"
- "What did you do in response to your partner showing up at all these places?"
- "How did it change the way you handled your friendships?"

These types of questions would provide useful information in same-sex or heterosexual relationships.

The behavioral, pattern-based approach works across diverse situations and scenarios and is not dependent on a gendered analysis. However, it also responds to the gendered facts on the ground and helps unpack the unconscious gender bias of practitioners and systems. In this way, it is both gendered and non-gendered at

the same time. A useful analogy may come from quantum physics. Quantum physics theorizes that light and other matter can act like a wave or as a particle. Waves and particles have different properties and significance in understanding how the universe functions. While apparently contradictory, both states of existence are real. Similarly, the Model acts as both a gendered and non-gendered approach due to its integration of a rigorous focus on a broad set of specific behaviors, a gendered analysis of parenting expectations and a broader analysis of social dynamics of gender and other forms of oppression.

Accuracy, rigor and holism: How a perpetrator pattern-based approach works in diverse situations

The Safe & Together Model strives for accuracy, rigor and holism through a focus on the following three areas of behavior:

- Coercive control
- Child maltreatment and
- Abusive behaviors toward others beyond the immediate family unit

In addition to the current family, it includes a "look back" at the perpetrator's behavior in other relationships, including past partners and parenting of other children. It might even include behaviors toward a new partner. This approach differs greatly from many other family violence or intimate partner assessment frameworks which often leave out one or more of these elements.

Let's examine each element for how it meets the criteria of being rigorous, accurate and holistic and fits into the gendered/non-gendered paradox.

The clear-eyed understanding that perpetration is a parenting choice creates space for a more accurate, alternative narrative than the one which blames mothers, who are survivors, for the harm that is occurring to their children.

The Perpetrator's Pattern - Coercive control

By using coercive control as the lens for considering risk and harm to children, there is a fuller examination of the nexus between domestic violence perpetrators' behaviors, and the functioning of the adult, child and family. This approach is much more illuminating than the incomplete "child witness" framework. While watching an

assault by one parent against another can be a source of great trauma for a child, assessment frameworks that consider this as the only nexus between domestic violence and children is significantly flawed. Perpetrators' behaviors impact children through multiple pathways, many of which do not involve the direct witnessing of violence. To be rigorous and accurate, an assessment approach needs to offer the ability to connect the dots between the perpetrator's behaviors and a broad range of life-changing effects like the loss of stable housing, interference with the partner's parenting or child behavioral health problems. Alongside witnessing the abuse of their other parent, the children's direct experience of abuse must be factored in as well.

Diving Deeper Into Impact on Children

It's not sufficient nor rigorous to solely ask, "Did the children witness the violence?"

We need to add to that question:

- "How did the perpetrator involve the children in the abuse of the partner?"
- "How did the perpetrator directly target the children?"
- "How did the perpetrator's behaviors disrupt and undermine the healthy functioning of the family?"

Questions like these can help make the connection between physical violence against a partner and other behaviors that have wide-reaching repercussions for the children. For example, an assault that leads to eviction from safe, stable housing can have a wide impact on the children's functioning, e.g., poorer academic performance because of the disruption in the daily routine, change in schools and trauma. The Safe & Together Model's Multiple Pathways to Harm assessment framework encompasses all of these different routes to help identify and document the impact of the perpetrator's behaviors on children's functioning.

The Perpetrator's Pattern - Child maltreatment

Including child maltreatment behaviors in the perpetrator pattern, increases the accuracy of assessments as the behaviors toward the adult and child survivors are intertwined. It is also consistent with

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the concept that the perpetrator, not the relationship, is being assessed. Abuse and neglect of children and coercive control toward the adult partner are intimately related. This can take numerous forms. For example:

- The perpetrator may use abuse and control the other parent in order to create an environment where it is easier to sexually abuse one or more of the children.
- The perpetrator's abuse often radiates out in multiple directions, often engulfing the entire family - forcing the other parent and children to work as a team to protect themselves.
- The perpetrator's focus on controlling the adult survivor's behaviors and thinking can often lead to neglect of the children as the perpetrator's needs are prioritized over the needs of the children.

For example, consider a case where the perpetrator drives all over town for hours, stalking his partner, with their uncared for (no nappies, no food) infant child in the car.

By combining coercive control, which has its primary focus on the adult partner, with child maltreatment, the Model sets the stage for interventions that hold abusive fathers accountable for a wider range of impacts on their children's day-to-day life. The clear-eyed understanding that perpetration is a parenting choice creates space for a more accurate, alternative narrative than the one which blames mothers, who are survivors, for the harm that is occurring to their children. The clarity about behaviors and responsibility strikes another blow against mother-blaming by contextualizing survivors' parenting and overall functioning inside the perpetrator's pattern and her social, cultural and economic context. By contextualizing the survivor's behaviors in this manner it becomes easier to see the strength, power and sophistication of the survivors' protective choices related to the children.

The Perpetrator's Pattern - Abusive behaviors toward others beyond the immediate family unit

The Model importantly considers violent behavior toward non-family members, extended family and even new partners of the perpetrator's former partner. It includes behavior toward other partners, new or old, and even children from other relationships. Since many intimate partner violence assessments are focused on the current relationship (instead of the perpetrator's pattern) they are often incomplete in their accuracy and may not reflect the experience of the survivor. Domestic violence survivors are likely to be aware of their partner's behaviors at the workplace or in the public sphere. From gang members to police officers who have used excessive force, the use of violence against non-family members

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can communicate threats and danger without the actual use of physical force against immediate family members. If we want to understand entrapment and control, we need to understand all the ways a perpetrator has demonstrated a willingness and ability to use force to obtain what they want. Similarly, domestic violence survivors may become aware of their partner's abuse against other partners.

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The use of a 360-degree perpetrator pattern-based approach, which considers abuse and violence in multiple settings, helps professionals factor in a fuller set of behaviors as an indicator of the perpetrator's capacity for violence and potential dangerousness. For example, if someone hospitalized another partner through assaultive behavior, even if that person's violence has not reached that level in the current relationship, that behavior needs to be factored into any assessment.

This three-legged perpetrator pattern, which weaves together coercive control, child maltreatment and wider patterns of violence, provides a powerful framework that identifies risk and safety concerns across diverse situations. Regardless of gender, sex or sexual orientation, it captures behaviors that are often ignored by a more limited, incident-based approach. Let's take a look at its application in different situations.

Applying the Model to women's use of violence against a male partner

When this approach is applied to a woman's use of violence against a male partner, the Model's perpetrator pattern-based approach remains rigorous and useful. The commitment to pattern-based assessment versus an incident-based approach ensures a woman's behavior will be evaluated by the same standard as a man's.

Pattern-based Thinking Helps Identify Women's Use of Control

While much more rare than men's use of coercive control against their female partner, women can engage in coercive control. A pattern-based approach can help us differentiate between those cases and a women's use of defensive violence. Consider a case where a woman is extremely controlling of her male partner, who had intellectual disabilities, telling him how he was supposed to behave and punishing him like a child. This same person has been violent in other situations including assault with a firearm. This behavior pattern is consistent with coercive control and raises real concerns for the emotional and physical safety of her male partner.

Assessing patterns helps discern when violence is defensive or an attempt at resisting an abuser, e.g., scratching someone's face when that person is engaging in a sexual assault. For example, if we use an assessment lens that considers coercive control as opposed to isolated incidents of violence, it becomes easier to see when a woman is engaging in an act of resistance to a wider pattern of threats, control, emotional abuse and physical violence. Conversely, the absence of that broader pattern by a male partner helps us see a woman's use of violence as the primary issue.

The Model's behavioral focus has also been extremely useful in cases that involve dual arrests. The perpetrator pattern-based approach helps us avoid the common trap of viewing these dual arrests as "mutual combat" or "family dysfunction." Wielded with precision, the approach tells us the most useful assessment is to ask about each person's pattern of coercive control and actions taken to harm the children. The perpetrator pattern-based approach considers the action of the individual as the foundation for a good assessment. In many instances, using this method, it quickly becomes clear that there is an inequality in the relationship - that one person has a pattern of coercive control and other abusive behaviors. When faced with a case where it is indicated that both parents are violent, use of the Model helps discern meaningful differences in the level of danger and risk.

Using the Model to Debunk Claims of "Mutual Violence"

In one situation, a case was presented to a team where both parents were violent. By exploring each person's pattern it became clear that one parent had engaged in multiple forms of violence, abuse and child abandonment, including numerous physical assaults and threats to sabotage treatment. The other parent had one instance of physical force: to stop the other parent from disabling a vehicle used by the other parent to get to work and run errands for the children. This second parent's behaviors paled in comparison to scope, breadth and impact on child and family functioning of the first parent. It was inaccurate and unhelpful to equalize the danger and harm to the children by referring to them both as "violent."

Applying the Model to situational violence, lateral violence and same-sex relationships

When violence is situational, the Model still works in helping discern the lack of pattern. This is why it is so important to start with the broadest assessment lens: coercive control, child maltreatment behavior, behaviors toward other partners and in public. Without this broad lens as a starting point, we are more likely to confuse an incident of situational violence for a wider pattern of abuse. The Model's perpetrator pattern-based approach has helped identify and sort these situations from more serious cases of entrapment and violence.

When applied in same-sex couples, the Model demonstrates its sensitivity to diverse social factors, like homophobia, that might be used by a domestic violence perpetrator to entrap and control a partner. Questions about specific behaviors can identify threats that are given power by broader social dynamics. Threats to 'out' a person from a conservative religious background to their parents carry weight due to homophobia. One parent legal custody situation might allow a perpetrator to threaten to take a child from the other parent. A behavioral focus using a coercive control lens makes it easier to identify these behaviors as being part of a pattern of abuse.

Similarly, the behavioral focus of the Model can even capture patterns of behavior that encompass extended family and kin. In some communities, lateral violence is an important aspect of domestic and family violence. Lateral violence of one family group against another can be part of an individual's pattern of coercive control. Using family members to spy, stalk or assault a survivor or her family can and should be included in part of a pattern-based assessment.

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Honor-based Abuse and Behavioral Assessments

So-called 'honor-based violence,' is a collection of practices used to control behavior within families in order to protect perceived cultural and religious

beliefs and/or honor. The perpetrator may use the wider family, community, and cultural or religious beliefs to further entrap the survivor. There may be multiple perpetrators within the community or wider family who are coercively controlling. This type of abuse differs from the many mainstream domestic abuse models of assessment that focus on the behaviors of a single abuser and challenges some of the notions of gender-based violence as female family members may be part of the group that is engaging in the systematic abuse of the survivor. At the same time, notions of honor and shame, particularly related to sexuality, child-rearing or domestic roles, are gendered and will disproportionally impact females. The Safe & Together Model's focus on patterns of behavior can help assess the actions of both the partner and their extended family.

Conclusion

Some people feel the issue of domestic abuse must be viewed through a gendered lens or a gender-neutral lens. This dichotomization has been a source of tension and has often led to the marginalization of the views of communities that do not subscribe to a gendered lens, either because they prioritize the role of other social forces like colonization or systemic racism in their communities, or because they are survivors of abuse that do not fit in the gender violence model.

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Our approaches to domestic violence must serve all communities and all survivors. The behavioral-based approach of the Safe & Together Model's behavioral focus, because it responds to the facts of abuse as they exist in diverse situations. At the same time, it would be wrong to de-gender the problem of intimate partner violence. By using coercive control, child maltreatment and violence to others outside the immediate family as the foundation of our assessment framework, there is a fact-based foundation to hold male perpetrators accountable as parents. Each element, in turn, offers something important to the assessment.

Coercive control helps identify entrapment and control that is energized by structural sexism. Child maltreatment helps connect the dots between fathers' behaviors and outcomes for children. And the wider lens of public violence helps account for men's strong monopoly on public violence and its influence on the family arena.

As Einstein said "It seems as though we must use sometimes the one theory and sometimes the other, while at times we may use either. We are faced with a new kind of difficulty. We have two contradictory pictures of reality; separately neither of them fully explains the phenomena (...), but together they do."

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